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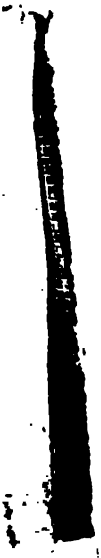
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KING STORK OF THE NETHERLANDS

A Romance of the Early Days of the Dutch Republic

BY ALBERT LEE

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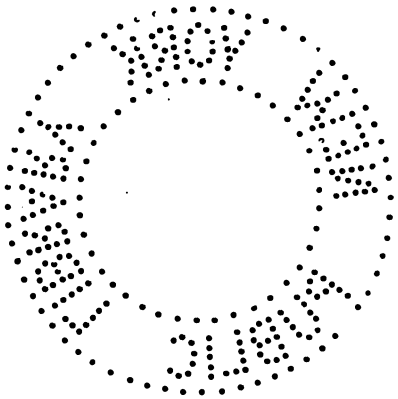
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KING STORK OF THE NETHERLANDS

CHAPTER I

THE BAN

My sister came into the room, full of excitement, and without waiting to get her breath began with the news that was uppermost in her mind.

At the time I was plodding away at Zwingli's Commentary on True and False Religion. Not that I cared for such dreary reading; but some of us had a discussion on hand concerning various points which the Swiss Reformer dealt with in this book, and I was looking into the matter for myself, so that I might be prepared to pull my opponents' arguments to pieces when I met them on the morrow. As will be seen presently, the discussion, so far as I was concerned, did not come off.

Barbara's first words made me look up at once; they so astonished me that I jumped to my feet, and, forgetful of the fact that my fingers were between certain pages to which I wanted to refer again, and which had only been found after long searching, I suffered the book to fall on the table, while I looked into her pretty face, as if to know more than her words conveyed.

"Bertrand, there is a ban out against the prince, and an enormous sum of money is promised to anyone who shall assassinate him!"

"God help us!" I cried on hearing this, my blood boiling with indignation.

Some, who did not know the circumstances, might have scouted the thought that anyone should wish to take the

f such a noble man as the Prince of Orange. But
was no room for surprise with us. The news did but
w on as the natural sequence of previous cruelties
expressions of unspeakable hate. The Spaniards, who
l the people of the Netherlands in a bondage more
el than any I have read of in the pages of history,
d exercised all their devilish ingenuity against us, hop-
g to force us to give up our Reformed religion and
cept Romanism, to suffer our rights to stand in abey-
nce, and submit to be ruled by whomsoever Philip, King
of Spain, might appoint. But freedom—religious and political—was our inalienable right, and, led by William the Silent, as men called the Prince of Orange, the Netherlanders resisted, and refused to be treated as slaves.

I will not stay here to recount what we, as a people, had suffered on account of our resistance. It would but be to tell of endless injustice, hangings, tortures, exile, impoverishment by reason of iniquitous taxes, Blood Councils, *auto da fés*, and ten thousand other shameful exhibitions of tyranny. As for the prince himself, he was never safe, night nor day. Men followed him everywhere, with the knife ready, only waiting an opportunity to plunge it into his heart.

Then Barbara brought in this news.

She looked at me and I at her, and for a while all that I could say was, "God help us!"

"'Tis true, Bertrand," she said at length. "I was passing St. Peter's when I saw a Spaniard go up to the door and nail a paper thereon. I paused, wondering what it might mean, and when the fellow had driven in the last nail he stood back a little and looked at it, chuckling while he did so. Then he turned aside and caught sight of me.

"'Ah! my pretty maid,' said he, so impudently, even trying while he spoke to chuck my chin with his dirty forefinger, 'there's some good reading yonder. It will set all Leyden agog, and be the theme of conversation for many a day.'

"I pushed his hand aside indignantly, careless whether he resented it or not, and he laughed loudly. He was

not have dared to treat me so had not the street been empty at the time.

"'A kiss, my pretty one. Nay, just one. Did ever a maiden look so tragic?' he added, when I struck him in the face, because he dared to put his arm about my waist.

"No sooner had I given him that blow than I repented, for who can tell the consequences of striking a Spaniard? It is true they have not the power in Leyden that they once had; yet every one seems to fear them even now. It is as though the fear had become part of our nature after so many years of oppression. But he only said again, 'Did ever a maiden look so tragic?' and turned away, laughing insolently, halting, however, when he had gone a few yards, to bid me read the paper and tell my friends.

"I went up to the door and read it. Oh! 'tis terrible, Bertrand."

She paused, for by this time the tears had come, and they coursed down her face freely, and her distress would suffer her to say no more.

"Come with me, Barbara," said I, when I had soothed her somewhat, "and we will go and see it ere it be too dark to read."

The cathedral church of St. Peter was not far away, for we lived in the Klogsteeg, just opposite the belfry which stood in the rear of the building. All we had to do was to pass along the street for a hundred yards or thereabouts, then down a narrow lane on the right, again to the right, and we were shortly after halting before the door on which the ban was fastened.

It was late in the evening, but being June, the setting sun yet left its glow in the sky, so that it was easy to read every word upon the paper. Several persons were there, but the news had gone from one to another, and before I had read the whole a crowd had gathered, others having read and passed on, indignant, telling those whom they met what they had seen.

"Read it, Bertrand Blomberg!" cried one with sturdy voice, who stood on the outside of the crowd. "'Twill be dark before some of us can come near enough to see for



ourselves what new infamy the accursed Spaniards have devised."

"Hist! What if some should hear thee?" said one. "There are still many in the city who may carry word to the Duke of Parma."

"What care I?" answered the other. "If any should dare to lay his hand on me, 'twill be the last time he ever does a stroke of duty. I'll brain him with this fist if it be true that yonder paper is a ban against the prince."

"Yet 'tis better to be careful, whether the Spaniards be here or not," observed another cautiously.

"Careful? Yes, I'll be careful if it be true that the prince is threatened. But I'll tell you what, friend; it will be 'carefulness' to shed twenty drops of Spanish blood for every one which belongs to the Prince of Orange—God bless him! But read the paper, Bertrand, and waste no time."

I stood with my back to the crowd, and scanned the document eagerly, reading it out slowly and loudly, so that all could hear, halting occasionally because of the hearty curses that came by way of comment. Every line betrayed the Spanish hate, and was false from end to end. It called the prince, who was the most honourable man that ever walked the earth, "a wretched hypocrite." There never were such calumnies put upon paper, for it charged a virtuous man with marrying an abbess while his wife was yet alive. It was due to him—so I read—that the Spanish soldiers had been compelled to resort to such horrible massacres; the fault was his that Holland was in rebellion, that trade was well-nigh ruined, that the trees bore so many hanging men on their branches, that the Holy Houses of the Inquisition were full, and that the Spanish Government was everywhere frustrated.

"Lies!"

"Accursed libels!"

"Sentences framed in hell!"

"Nay, they bear the mark of Cardinal Granvelle, for I have heard the like before, when he was speaking."

Such were the cries which interrupted me.

"I have more to read," I exclaimed, my forefinger marking the spot where I had left off reading.

"Silence!" shouted one impatiently. "Let Master Blomberg read the thing to the end, so that we may know the worst."

A hush followed, and my words came distinctly, as I traced the lines with my forefinger:

"For these causes we declare him traitor and miscreant, enemy of ourselves and of the country. As such we banish him perpetually from all our realms, forbidding all our subjects, of whatever quality, to communicate with him openly or privately—to administer to him victuals, drink, fire, or other necessaries. We allow all to injure him in property or life. We expose the said William Nassau as an enemy of the human race—giving his property to all who may seize it. And if any one of our subjects or any stranger should be found sufficiently generous of heart to rid us of this pest, delivering him to us, alive or dead, or taking his life, we will cause to be furnished to him immediately after the deed shall have been done the sum of twenty-five thousand crowns in gold. If he have committed any crime, however heinous, we promise to pardon him; and if he be not already noble, we will ennoble him for his valour."

Save for the added signature of Philip, King of Spain, that was the end. But it was more than enough. It was a disgrace to the monarch who appended his name to such a document. It branded Cardinal Granvelle, who had advised and framed it, with eternal infamy. It added on to all the wrongs we had endured at Spanish hands. And yet it appeared to be the natural climax of all the cruelties, the calumnies, and the base injustice that had been practised since the emperor, Charles the Fifth, had abdicated, and his son reigned over Spain and the Netherlands in his stead.

It was enough to turn and gaze upon the crowd; for what I saw on the faces of the men and women there was, as it were, the reflection of my own feelings. Barbara was in tears—so were all the women and many of

the men. They were mad with anger, but the very sense of their impotence disheartened them. The world contained hundreds who would sell their souls for such a price—five-and-twenty thousand crowns and a patent of nobility. The murderer in his cell, awaiting the coming of the executioner, would crave to be set free, if he did but know, to have such a chance put in his way.

"The prince's life is not worth an hour's purchase," exclaimed a maiden at my side. "Alas! he is doomed!"

CHAPTER II

THE CATHEDRAL OF ST. PETER

Ill news is never slow to travel, and when we reached our home Mistress Materin, our aunt, who had come to dwell with us when her husband had been done to death at Huissen by the Inquisitors, knew all about it, and was sitting in the window with our old nurse, Martha Sweveseel, looking for our return to tell us what she had heard.

"Have you heard the news, my children?" she called down the stairs, while we were entering by the front door.

"Yes, aunt; and we have seen and read the ban," I answered.

Before long we were eagerly engaged in telling what we knew, and then we settled down to silence. The publication of that ban called back all the old sorrows, and not one of us sitting there but had suffered intensely. Martha was a widow—widowed by the Spanish shot that raked the city during that famous siege six years before. Barbara and I, too, were fatherless and motherless, for while my mother had died of disease aggravated by famine when Leyden was beleaguered, my father—a city councillor—had been treacherously killed. He went out under a flag of truce, to see whether it was not possible to come to terms with the besiegers, but because he would not promise to persuade the city to surrender unconditionally, he was shot, even with the white flag in his hand. Time is said to be a great healer, so that while the memories were bitter, and the spirit of forgiveness had absolutely died, the old home life went on its wonted way, and our daily interests made their claims upon us, and had their due attention.

As for Barbara, two or three years my junior, and about two-and-twenty at the time, she was too good-looking not to have plenty of suitors; and she had chosen the best, I think, out of many good ones. But the choice did not appear to lend itself to wedded life in the homeland. Conrad de Bresse had committed the unpardonable sin of expressing openly his loyalty to the popular cause, and the Blood Council got on his track, so that he dared not show his face in the Netherlands. He fled to England, whence it was madness to return.

We sat on and on, each one busy with the thoughts that came closest to the individual heart: I thinking how I could plan my business so as to be free to enter on the prince's service, and do my share toward giving the final blow which would altogether break the Spanish power; Barbara trying to picture her lover in the streets of London, perhaps, which she hoped to see some day; and Aunt Bertha going over in her mind those dreadful days when her husband had given up the struggle in the torture room. I looked up furtively, and marked the faces of the two widows, and did not wonder when on the cheeks of both I saw the trace of tears.

Sad thoughts do not sit well in a young man's heart. He has not the quiet fortitude, which is next to heroism, that a woman has; and I was like men in general in this regard. I grew restless. The elder women sat with folded hands. Barbara stood at the window with her hands behind her, and gazed listlessly down the quiet street, scarce dark, because the summer sun had left its afterglow to hold the night back as long as possible. Then I stood a while at her side, until my impatience made me turn to quit the room.

"Where are you going, Bertrand?" said she.

"For a walk. The room seems far too small to breathe in. Will you come?"

She turned at once, and followed me across the room.

Time was when no one dared to walk the streets after dark had set in, for the Spanish watchmen arrested the venturesome and took them to the prison house. It was so even now in many a town and city where the Spaniards

yet held sway; but ever since the siege the Spaniards had smaller power in Leyden, and could not carry things with so high a hand. Up to a certain point we had won our liberties—always face to face with the fact, however, that at any time the Duke of Parma, or some other Spanish commander, might sweep down upon us with his unrivalled soldiery and lock us in. Now, at any rate, we could walk abroad, and such Spaniards as were in the town were there on sufferance, until Leyden should fall into Spain's hands again.

"Where shall we go?" asked Barbara, taking my hand, as if for protection, for even yet the fears of her girlhood had not altogether died away, and a tremor passed through her when she saw a couple of Spaniards walk by, engaged in eager conversation.

"Let us go to St. Peter's and read the ban again," said I.

"'Tis too dark, brother."

"Nay, the lamp will be burning by this time, and I should like to read the paper at our leisure."

Hand in hand we started on the way, meeting some wayfarer here and there, but not staying to speak to any. When we reached the cathedral door we found it ajar, with a key in the lock, and while the lamp was burning, the light so fell that we could not read the shameful document. At first I thought to lay hold upon the iron ring and pull the door into its place, but my hand halted midway, and I listened. There were voices within, coming, as it were, in whispers, but what was said it was impossible to hear. Then followed some footsteps, as of two men walking slowly away, the whispered conversation still going on, but growing less distinct.

My sister, marking the sudden stoppage of my hand, bent her head forward, as if to hear.

"Shall we go in, Barbara?"

"I am afraid."

"No harm can come; and more than that, I have my sword. None ought to be in there at so late an hour. Come, Barbara, but on your toes."

A moment later we were inside, as much intruding as



those already in the church, but standing in the black shadows unseen, and, by reason of the darkness, unable to see anyone. We could hear the footsteps, now growing more faint with every moment, but no sound that told of conversation. The light from the lamp outside stole into the building, and getting used to the darkness, we found that the seats, the pillars, a corbel here and there, a hassock, and the dim outline of distant windows, were becoming visible. Then came a halt in the sound of falling feet, a little scuffle as of two men turning, a stumble over a stool, an impatient word as one sought to keep his footing, a fall, and then an oath, strangely out of place in the house of God.

"Hush, my son. Such words are unseemly in this holy place."

The words came clearly down the aisle.

"I crave your pardon, father, but the pain was sharp," was the response in a voice which was strangely familiar.

"As sharp, think you, as when your dagger finds the prince's heart?"

I thought I heard a low chuckle follow the words, which were quietly spoken—scarcely in more than a whisper, as before—but magnified in the silent cathedral, and therefore audible.

The sound of the footsteps began again, and now grew louder every moment. Presently, out of the darkness emerged two figures, plainer yet a moment or two later; then into the full path of the light which came in from the street through the open doorway. One was a priest, but his face was cowled, so that I could not see it. By the side of his companion he looked tall, for the other was short, and, judging from his tight-fitting suit, thin, and walking with a shambling gait. I thought I knew that walk, but the dim and uncertain light did not help me much.

Not a word was spoken until the men reached the open door, and there they halted.

"Will you attempt it, Gerard?" said the priest presently.

"Bethink you, father. Have you forgotten that in

Leyden I have dropped the name, and men only know me here as Francis Guion, a shopman with Master Blomberg, in the Klogsteeg?"

These words came distinctly, as if the speaker had forgotten caution in the one particular in his endeavour to insure the keeping of his secret.

"Nay, not so loud, my friend," was the priest's response in a low tone, yet loud enough for us to hear, since we were so near. "I forgot that you had dropped the family name, and that people no longer know you as Balthazar Gerard. But let that pass. I will be careful in future. But concerning this ban and the reward—will you undertake the task? The pay is splendid—five-and-twenty thousand crowns, with a patent of nobility. 'Tis an excellent prospect for a miller's son. Instead of standing behind the counter of Master Bertrand Blomberg, who, though a heretic, is not a bad master, I grant, you may take your place among the proud hidalgos of Spain, and, I wot, not merely be in affluence, and revered by every true Catholic all your days, but perhaps canonized for having rid the world of a traitor and miscreant."

"I would do it for naught, father," exclaimed the other passionately, less careful than before. There was not a sound outside of any passer-by, so that there was little need for caution. "Ay, for naught, for all the hate I have for him."

"And is the money no temptation, my son?"

"Yes. I want it sorely; for already it has been so scarce, and I have gambled so, that I know not any day when my master may discover how I have robbed him of two hundred crowns."

There was a pause again. The words had been so spoken that they betokened great fear, which was not much to be wondered at; for the laws of the Netherlands against theft were terribly severe, and meant consignment to a dungeon where the horrors far exceeded the enormity of the crime. But these are days when Mercy does not often sit by the side of Justice.

"Two hundred crowns! 'Tis a flea-bite, my son, compared to five-and-twenty thousand crowns! I will absolve

you to-night, if you will; and if you must needs gamble—if you love the dangerous pastime—then you may gamble for many a day to come to your heart's content. Say, will you kill the prince?"

The priest himself had now forgotten caution, and his words were above a whisper.

"God helping me, I will!" came the emphatic answer.

Even as Guion spoke, he drew a dagger from the inside of his doublet, and gazed at it intently.

"Yes, by God's help, I will, and this shall do the deed!"

The weapon flashed in the lamplight, raised high and threateningly. The priest involuntarily stepped back, as if he feared that his companion meant to drive it into his own body, and his hands went out to ward off the blow. Then the young man—in whose eyes there was something that made one think of madness—brought down the weapon with savage force. The blade gleamed as the light caught it, and plunged into the door, where, so savage was the blow, it quivered for a moment, then snapped clean off, and the hilt, jarring Guion's hand, and loosening from the grasp, fell with a clatter on the stones.

"Why did you step back, father?" exclaimed Gerard, or Guion, for I knew not now what it was best to call him; and he turned quickly on the priest, whose hands were still uplifted.

"My son, you startled me. It seemed as though you had suddenly gone mad, and were about to plunge the dagger into my bosom."

Guion laughed, almost hysterically, but the priest, stepping forward hastily, placed his hand upon the other's mouth, and bade him, for the love of Heaven, be silent.

"Forgive me, father, once more," said Guion quickly, all the laughter gone from his face. "I *was* mad for the moment. I thought the prince was there, and I sought to plunge the knife into his treacherous heart."

There was silence for a few moments. Not a word was spoken by the two men, who stood on the cathedral threshold, gazing into the now empty and darkened street.

Barbara's hand clasped mine convulsively, and she drew near to me as if for protection, so that I felt her trembling, and thought I heard a smothered sob of horror. For my own part I was angry beyond words, and had not my sister been with me I would have laid violent hands on this scoundrel priest and the would-be assassin.

But I could deal with Francis Guion later; and for the priest, I would take my chance. Perhaps the time would come when I could requite him for his wickedness.

While I thought thus, the two conspirators passed into the street without another word. The priest put his hand upon the heavy iron ring, and drew the door toward him. The key was already in the lock, and as the great door, creaking on its hinges, closed, the bolt was shot into its place, the key was drawn away, and we were left in the church, with our escape cut off.

CHAPTER III

A PRISONER

An exclamation expressive of consternation came from Barbara's lips when she heard the scream of the key in the lock, and realized that we were imprisoned. She started forward, drawing her hand away from mine, as if she would beat upon the door, so that the priest and his companion might hear her before they went away. But I was quick to hold her by the dress, and whispered her to be silent.

"But we are as good as prisoners, brother, and must stay here the long night through, and all in darkness," she answered, shuddering at the prospect of a vigil in the vast cathedral.

"Nay, Barbara, not a long night, for it will be early sunrise, and then we can look for some way of exit, which, in the darkness, we can not find," I said encouragingly.

"True, Bertrand. But may there not be some possible way out—some window—or perchance an open door?"

"Take my hand, sister," said I gently, hoping to lessen her dread of spending hours of darkness in the church, since, as men often said, the spirits of the dead whose bodies had been buried there walked up and down the aisles, and went their way with ghostly tread through nave and chapel, as if they yet loved the world they had known and lived in years before.

"And if I take your hand, brother, what then?" she asked, shivering with nervous dread, and sobbing once, somewhat hysterically.

"Then? Why, go to sleep, while I keep watch with my

sword in hand," I answered cheeringly; yet I must confess I did not care for the prospect.

Just then the great bell struck the hour, and the sound of the heavy strokes appeared to travel from arch to arch and from pillar to pillar, lingering, as if loath to end their music.

"Eleven, Bertrand. It will be three o'clock before the morning light comes again; four long hours——"

She stopped suddenly, and, pressing my hand, begged me not to think her childish for giving way to such paltry fear.

"I will be brave and wait; or if you wish it, dear brother, we will walk round and seek some way of exit. How foolish to be afraid!"

"Not so," I answered soothingly. "One does not care to be shut in a great, wandering place like this, although 'tis true there is nothing to fear. Come. Take my hand, and we will feel our way around. It may chance that some door may be insecurely fastened."

Then a thought came that, after all, since the doors were folded together, it might be possible that by loosening the bolts I could draw them inward, and so achieve our exit. Bidding my sister stay where she was, I stepped forward. Feeling about in the darkness, I found the iron rod which served as handle to the topmost bolt, and pulled it down. It came out of its place with a noise that went travelling down the aisle, and had its answer from every corner of the building. Stooping, I felt again, and found the lower bolt, and that moved also when I gave an upward pull. Then, drawing the doors toward me with a vigorous wrench, the way was open to the street.

Barbara was at my side in a moment, and when she saw the open door, and the light of the street lamp streaming in and losing itself in the church, as it did before, she exchanged her fears for laughter, and darted out into the summer night and freedom.

"I was a great coward, Bertrand," she exclaimed, when, after I had pulled the doors together, she took my hand and walked with me. "But I do not like the church at night, especially since Martha told me once that in the

darkness the saints come out of their pictures, and the skeletons from their graves, to walk the aisles."

"Such nonsense!" said I, with pretended severity; yet to have said it unkindly would have been cruel, for Barbara had a sensitive nature, and was not altogether free from the superstitions which our old nurse had instilled into both of us from our earliest days.

"Well, I suppose it was nonsense, brother. At all events we are free now, thank God!" And her sweet voice rang along the silent streets with merry laughter.

When we reached the house we found Aunt Bertha at the street door, anxious by reason of our long absence, and Martha with her, as jealous of our safety always as though we were her own flesh and blood.

"Where have you been, children?" exclaimed my aunt, coming forward a step or two into the street to greet us.

"To church," answered Barbara gaily; for she saw the anxiety on Aunt Bertha's face, and realized with a glance that time had not sufficed to kill that dread which sad experiences had given birth to. Although the people of Leyden, while they were compelled to tolerate the presence of some Spaniards in the city, had thrust out the Familiars of the Inquisition, the dear old aunt could not get rid of the thought that they might even yet be present to lay their hands on some of us, and put us to the torture.

"To church at such an hour?"

She said this in a tone of incredulity, but, bidding her enter, and we would tell her all, I stood on the door-step and waited while she and the others passed into the house.

"Is Francis in?" I asked carelessly.

"Yes. He came in some time ago, and went straight to bed," said Martha, who lingered somewhat. "I think he must be mad, Master Bertrand, for he muttered something, I know not what, at every step, but did not respond to my 'Good night.'"

"Mad? I'll tell you something presently, Martha, that will explain all that." And saying this, I stepped in and locked the shop door.

Before long the story was told of what we had seen and heard in the cathedral; and then we sat and talked over this grave fact, that treachery was contemplated by one of our household.

Once Martha glanced round quickly to the door, and we followed her eyes and listened intently.

"What is it?" asked Aunt Bertha, almost in a whisper.

"I thought I heard a sound outside, and some heavy breathing," was her reply. While she spoke the door appeared to move, though slightly, and the latch dropped into its place, the sound being heard distinctly by each one of us. Springing to my feet, so hastily that the chair on which I had been sitting overturned and fell to the floor with a noisy clatter, I hurried to the door and flung it open. Stepping into the dark passage I listened, but all was silent out there.

"What shall I do?" I asked, coming back into the room. "Shall I go up and see if Francis is in bed?"

"It may have been my fancy that I heard anything," said Martha, breaking the silence which followed my question.

"But we heard the latch fall," I asserted.

"True. Go and listen at the door of his bedchamber," suggested Aunt Bertha.

Following her advice I went up the stairs, stumbling once, and making some commotion in doing so; but when I reached the bedroom door I heard the heavy breathing of a sleeper. It was fancy, after all, and the latch must have fallen, not having dropped into its place when the last one entered the sitting room. Thinking thus I went back to the others, said good night, and before long we were all in bed.

Whether the others slept or not I can not say. As for myself, I might as well have sought to sleep amid the noise and throng of battle. I rolled and tossed about for a full hour, trying to think out the best plan of action —what I should do with Guion; whether I should keep an eye on all his movements, or go to the burgomaster and tell him what Barbara and I already knew.

Guion's room was exactly over mine, and presently I heard a footfall on his floor.

"He is moving about and up to mischief," said I to myself. "I will go and see him, and have the matter out with him without further waiting."

With that I sprang out of bed and dressed hastily. Taking a candle in my hand I walked up the stairs, and without knocking for permission to enter, went straight into the room.

Guion was standing at a table, looking at a broad Dutch dagger, the shining blade of which gleamed as it caught the candlelight. His back was toward me, and I saw that he was dressed for a journey.

"Why astir so early?" said I, closing the door behind me, and speaking quietly.

He looked round with a start, and with a half-smothered cry of amazement hurriedly thrust the dagger into his doublet, as if desirous to conceal it. But the sight of me, his master, seemed to hold him spellbound, and he gave me no answer to my question.

"Did you not hear me? Why astir so early?"

"What is that to you?" he asked insolently, somewhat recovering himself.

"It is much to me," I answered; and then, indiscreetly, and carried away by my indignation, alike from what I knew and by reason of his insolence, I added: "Much to me, both as to what you are doing here and what you did in the cathedral not long ago."

Strangely enough, he did not start at this, and as I stood gazing at him, and he at me, I was convinced that he had been listening at the door below while Barbara and I told our story.

I was standing, candle in hand, and the savage gleam in Guion's eyes causing me to think myself in danger, especially since his hand went to his doublet, where he had thrust his weapon out of sight, I too sought with my right hand for my dagger. It would never do to run the risk of an onslaught from one so desperate and not be ready. Suddenly something came between us, and in place of light there was darkness. The candle I held w

dashed from my hand, and I was being smothered in the heavy folds of a cloth garment which seemed to bind my arms down to my sides. Even my dagger, already in hand, was useless. Taken unawares, I was robbed of all power of resistance, and stood there helpless, although I struggled as best I could.

"Snatch that dagger out of his hand, Gerard," said some one, in a voice which seemed far off and yet familiar. "And if he speaks"—here the voice was plainer, as if the speaker had put his mouth close up to the cloth that inclosed me—"thrust the steel into him, anywhere, so long as you silence him."

"'Tis done, father," came a scarcely audible response, as a strong hand was laid upon my own, and my weapon wrenched away.

Helpless, incapable of resistance, gasping for air, for I was held so closely, I was quickly bound, hand and foot, and then uncovered. The cloth was moved from my face cautiously, being lifted from beneath a little way, and the stranger warned me that any call for aid would be the signal for my death. When I looked around I saw that he was none other than the priest whom I had seen at the cathedral.

"I will gag him, Gerard——"

"My name is Guion, father!" exclaimed the other in a low but angry voice.

"Guion, of course. I crave your pardon, but I have Gerard very much in mind just now," said the stalwart priest, with a chuckle of amusement and a gleam of mischief in his eyes. "I will gag this young gentleman, and do you stand, so! and if he ventures to say a word above a whisper, send that dagger well home, and he will tell no tales."

A few moments passed, and I lay on Guion's bed, alone and in darkness. The others had gone away, locking the door cautiously on the outside, and drawing away the key. Where they went, or what they did, I have no means of telling. I only know that I lay there, my hands growing numb by reason of the tightness of the cord with which I had been bound.



CHAPTER IV

"LONG LIVE THE BEGGARS!"

THE dawn came and found me still a prisoner, my hands swollen by reason of the cords, which bit into the skin so cruelly that I dared not wrench at them at all, lest I should make my case still more distressing, for with bonds so tight and a broken skin the pain would be unendurable. Had I been able to call aloud my case would have scarcely been better, for my own room and Guion's were far removed from the others, where my aunt and sister and the women servants slept. The only thing that I could do was to lie there and wait until one of the shopmen—who all slept out, save Guion—should come and rouse the lazy fellow, who was more prone to bed than business. Yet even in this there was reason to believe that they might be deceived. It would be easy for them to come to the conclusion that Guion was gone out, since the key was not in the lock.

How long should I have to stay there? And mean while what might not the danger of the prince be wit this infatuated and would-be assassin on the quest? T long and helpless stay on the same bed whereon Gui had laid many and many a night, perhaps concoct plans for the prince's death, and professing at the tim his sojourn under my roof to be a zealous followe the Reformers and an inveterate hater of everything pertained to Rome, served to madden me; and in my for our great leader's safety, I almost forgot the which my bonds were causing me. In my fancy Guion stealing upon the unsuspecting prince, the of the dagger in the sunshine, the awful blow; I

hear the cry of mortal agony and the fall; and then the dead form lay on the floor, of one who had done so much, and suffered beyond all telling for his beloved country, as he constantly called it. That sight came again, and yet again, until the horror of the thing grew upon me, and the sweat drops, which I was powerless to wipe away, stood on my brow.

The hours went on slowly. The window of the chamber where I lay was open, and as the sun rose higher, the sounds of city life were growing louder and more continuous. The Klogsteeg was a busy street, and the noise of the traffic came as usual. After that, since the cathedral bell had long ago struck the hour of six, there came some stirring blows upon the door, and then a loud voice:

"Francis Guion, 'tis time thou wert at the counter. Thou art idleness itself, to need calling every morning of the year. When wilt stir thy lazy limbs and stay thy snoring?"

There followed a long pause, as if my foreman waited for a reply. Since none came, he thundered on the door again and tried the latch.

"Guion, thou art incorrigible. I would that the master knew how I have to stir thee up every morning. I wot he would give thee less pay and dock the privileges. And artful, too, to make the door fast, so that I can not come in to pull thee out of bed. Get up! Dost hear me?"

As his voice rose, so did Hans Ryholt's blows grow more vigorous—so vehement, indeed, that I thought the door must needs fall off its hinges. I wished it would.

Meanwhile I lay helpless, striving to make myself heard, but all in vain. If I groaned audibly Ryholt did not hear it, for presently he exclaimed aloud:

"Why, the fellow is not in his room! There is no key in the lock. And what means this?—he has thrust in this outside bolt! Did he fear that robbers might come in through the window and rob his master? Not he, the scurvy sly fox! He has not so much care for a good master's weal."

After no small grumbling I heard the man's heavy footfalls on the stairs.

When they had died away I lay there in despair. I began to fear that since the outer bolt was thrust into the socket—which was our custom to see to when night came, if the room chanced to be unoccupied, so that none who were bent on robbery might get into the house from our neighbour's roofs—all in the household would conclude that the room was empty, and days might go by before I should be found. And meanwhile consternation would fill the hearts of those who loved me when they found that I was gone, none knew whither. If they searched for me they would prosecute their quest in every direction but the right one.

I lay and thought. The hours passed on, noon coming, when I could hear the clang of the wooden shoes of the workpeople on the stones in the street as they passed to their homes for the midday meal. It was during the interval for dinner that I heard my sister's voice, and presently my aunt answered her. They were on the landing outside, looking into every room, expressing their wonder as to where I might be.

"He must have gone out, aunt, before the men came to their work," said Barbara, and by the tone of her voice I felt sure that she was anxious.

"But what would call him away so early?" was the response. "He said nothing concerning it last night."

"And no wonder, since he was so engrossed with what we saw in the cathedral. It must have served to drive everything out of his mind for the time being."

Barbara was interrupted by Martha's quick-spoken words, sounding some little distance away, as though she stood at the bottom of the stairs, close by my own bedroom door below.

"I do not believe the young master can be far away. I know every shoe he has to his name, and every garment. There is not a shoe nor a doublet missing, and think you, he would have gone abroad shoeless, and his hosen only? Not he! He is far too smart a

clothes-proud to give people occasion to talk. There is not even a cap missing."

"Then where is he gone?" cried Barbara hopelessly. "This room where Francis Guion sleeps is bolted securely on the outside, and there is no key in the door."

"And no money in the till! And the street door was wide open when Hans Ryholt came this morning," exclaimed Martha decisively. "I'll tell what I think, my pretty mistress," she went on. "I've been turning it over in my mind, and I wot the dinner is none the better for the distraction, and my journeys up and down these stairs to see what is gone from my master's room whenever any fresh thought has come."

"Never heed the dinner, Martha. What has been in your mind? Tell me quickly," exclaimed my Aunt Bertha, "for I am consumed with anxiety."

"This, then, Mistress Materin. That lantern-jawed Guion, that spawn of Satan, and Papist in disguise——"

"Have done with calling the shameless creature names. Let us hear what is in your mind," said my aunt again, and this time with some asperity.

"Then have it as you will, mistress," was Martha's brusque retort. "My own opinion is that Guion was robbing the till, that my master heard him, and came down the stairs half dressed, saw the rascal helping himself to money that was not his own, and dashed after him, heedless of dress or aught else, so that he might catch the thief."

"But that must have been at daydawn, and it is now long past noon," cried Barbara. "He would not have spent a whole morning chasing a graceless thief without some one having seen him! Where can he be now?"

I could hear her sigh as she stood so near, and yet so far away from the brother she so longed to find.

"God only knows," exclaimed Martha. "I wish I had that Guion here, and I know full well he would pay down something handsome to have me a mile away!"

The old sick feeling came again when I heard them going slowly down the stairs, fully as anxious as I, but little suspecting that I was so near, and yet unable to



make them know it. More than that, what with the cramped position by reason of my bonds, and of hunger, I was feeling ill and weak. The prospect of my imprisonment lasting for some time to come was depressing. Since there was no reason why anyone should desire to enter this prison cell—for such it was to me—I might stay there for many a day; and then death, perhaps, would have done its work. It was early, of course, to have such thoughts as these, but when one has nothing to do but consider his own plight, the evil of the case—when pain is present to aggravate it—is certain to come to the fore, and hopelessness will not lag far behind. To hear the dear ones talking as they had done, and hope, while listening, that something would chance to make them turn their attention to the room in which I lay, yet find that they had not the faintest thought of entering, and, indeed, that they were gone away—what wonder that the sluice gates should be lifted, as it were, and that the tumultuous flood of despairing thoughts should pour in upon me?

By this time I was almost beside myself with pain, and I know not in which sense my case was worst—whether in my mind, with the double prospect of my own death and the prince's awful danger, or in the matter of my physical misery. The bonds every moment appeared to grow tighter. The flesh at my wrists and ankles was swollen almost above the cords which bound them. The faintest movement, the breathing, almost, seemed to jar, and the cords to cut in. The blood itself began to show, indicating that the skin had given way at last—it was intolerable. Sometimes I thought to myself that I would roll off the bed, and contrive by slow degrees to get near to the door, so as to lie there on my back and batter against the boards with my feet. But I had nothing on them save my stockings. Not only so, but when, by way of experiment, I lifted my bound feet, the pain was excruciating.

The streets again began to grow noisy after the temporary lull in the traffic for the midday meal. Now and again would come from the Klogsteeg the snatch of a

song and the crack of a whip that kept time with the music. For things were not as they had once been. The Prince of Orange had championed our cause, and was now our uncrowned king; and, by his splendid persistency and leadership, he had succeeded in causing the Spanish grip to relax considerably. There was reason to believe that in time there would not be a Spaniard on Dutch soil, while the accursed Inquisition would be but a memory. Tyranny, intolerance, confiscation, and torture were yet doing their work in many a city even now; but as for Leyden, there was not so much as a nominal Spanish occupation, for since the siege no Spanish soldier ventured inside the gates. The Inquisition had no terrors for us, for the last Familiar had been thrust out of Leyden at the sword's point, and men worshipped God according to their own desire. It was nothing to wonder at, therefore, that the spirit of the people rose, and that cheerful looks came back to their faces, so that only occasionally the old fear displayed itself.

But none of these things concerned me now. The sounds that betokened lightheartedness chafed my spirit sorely, just as the rough cords were galling the flesh up to the point of torture. To think of gladness down in the street below, the light-hearted banter, the pleasant greetings, the basking in the sunshine—all serving to make men and women happy; it was like mockery. Even the sunshine itself was adding to the pain, for it poured through the window on to my face, blinding me almost as its glare fell across my eyes. The burning rays added to my growing thirst, parching my gagged mouth, in which the tongue was swelling as if to end my life by choking me.

After a time the sun had passed on, so that it fell slantwise into that part of the room at the foot of the bed. I remember thanking God in my heart for the relief from the blinding glare, but its heat had left me utterly exhausted. Presently the cathedral bell struck out the hour of four. When the sound had died away I heard a sweet voice not far distant—a well-known one in Leyden. It belonged to Peter Bakkerzeel, a half-witted creature who was wont to prowl about the streets, singing the Flemish ballads, or



some of the hymns that were used at the field preachings. Men and women often flung him a coin, which he would catch with much dexterity, and he would respond with many a grimace expressive of gratitude. Or they would call him into their houses to give him food.

He was a wanderer. For days and weeks together he would disappear, and be heard of occasionally at some distant town or village, returning when the wandering fit was over, and staying until he must needs be gone again. Peter was like the pigeons that had their homes in Leyden. He loved to be on the house tops, from whence he could look down into the thoroughfares below, calling to the passers-by, sometimes having fun at their expense, or singing to them; and when they offered him a coin he would tell them to put it on a window sill close by. None would touch it, since it belonged to Peter, who, when he felt disposed, would climb down a waterspout, pocket the money, and return to the roofs again.

Some one once asked him why he loved the house tops rather than the streets.

"I am nearer to my mother in heaven, where they do not torture her as those Inquisition devils did!" was his response. "Sometimes, too, she speaks to me, and I hear her; but down here, where there is such noise, I can not tell what she is saying."

I listened to the ballad which Peter sang that afternoon. So far as I could judge, he was close at hand; probably, as was his wont, kneeling on the copestone, looking down into the street. If one were not in trouble, it was delightful to hear the clear rich voice, solemn and slow if the theme were sad, or gay and boisterous when the song demanded it. That afternoon Peter's mood was defiant:

"Beat the drum gaily, rub-a-dow, rub-a-dub;
Beat the drum gaily, rub-a-dub, rub-a-dow;
Beat the drum gaily, rub-a-dow, rub-a-dub;
Long live the Beggars! is the watchword now.

"The Spanish Inquisition, without intermission—
The Spanish Inquisition has drunk our blood;
The Spanish Inquisition, may God's malediction
Blast the Spanish Inquisition and all her brood.

"Long live the Beggars! wilt thou Christ's word cherish;
Long live the Beggars! be bold of heart and hand;
Long live the Beggars! God will not see thee perish;
Long live the Beggars! O noble Christian band."

When the ballad was ended I could hear the tramp of his feet on the copestone, and he came nearer, singing that last verse again.

Seeing the window open he thrust in his head, as if to call on anyone who chanced to be within to hear him; but the song came to a sudden stop. A half-hysterical laugh escaped his lips, while he gazed at me with a look of vast surprise.

"Pope and Papists! What in Heaven's name can this mean? A man in bed on a summer's afternoon! But let me see. Whose room is this? Ay, I know. 'Tis that rogue's, Francis Guion. The lazy beast! I've heard that he could not be found, though they have sought him high and low. I'll go in and rouse him, and tell him the time o' day."

Once more singing his song, he began to clamber in through the window.

"'Beat the drum gaily, rub-a-dow, rub-a-dub!' I'll beat his lazy bones, I'll warrant," he added, halting in his song while he dropped from the window on to the floor, brandishing his knotted stick when he stood looking at me, and then turning back his sleeves from his wrist, as if to have free play in punishing one for whom he had no great affection.

He was a strange creature to look at. His face was as beautiful as his voice was sweet, but the beard which grew upon his chin was knotted and tangled, while the hair hanging over his forehead almost came down to the heavy eyebrows. He was a child in many things; a man in point of years, for he had passed his thirtieth year. The beautiful face, with its generally placid look, almost of benevolence and tenderness, but changing often to quiet apathy when it became wan and haggard, was not in keeping with the body. The difference, indeed, was almost grotesque. The head was large, the face full and round. It might have belonged to a man of stalwart

growth, full-fleshed and vigorous; but the body was thin and shrunken, the chest narrow, the shoulders rising somewhat, as if to keep the head from drooping sideways. The back was not strong enough, apparently, to bear the weight of the head, and was somewhat bent at the shoulders. Yet he was astonishingly active, and more than once had shown a dexterity which many a strong man might have envied.

"Now, Francis Guion," he went on to say, placing his stick under his arm, so as to be free to fasten back his sleeves, and leave his thin wrist bare, "you once beat me soundly, but I have not forgotten it. I'll be a Familiar, now that I have the chance, and torture you to my heart's content. For I see that 'tis not laziness but necessity that keeps you here, since you are bound. Ah! many a time have I been in this room while you slept at night, and the moonbeams fell upon your ugly face, but somehow I had not the courage, for you are strong and I am only weak. Dost remember how you took hold of me once, and beat my head against the pillar at the door of the burgomaster's house, just because I asked for a ryksdaaler, and promised to sing you a song? You may have no memory, but that's not to be wondered at. Cowards can forget at will, but Peter Bakkerzeel never forgets. I carried a stone in my pocket for three long years to throw at some one who, on a certain day, flung one at me, causing me to fall and break my leg. But, mark you, he did not break my spirit. No! Nor did he spoil my memory. I saw him, and had my chance. God save us! how he screamed when the stone went swinging through the air and struck his ankle! Ha! he limps to-day! But he never throws stones at Peter now. Not he! If he did, for his one I would throw two. I do not love to hurt anyone. I would not kill a fly. I do not love to beat you, and see you in pain, as you will be when I use my stick. But as my mother once said—God bless her! She's in heaven now! the book she used to hide in her bosom made her say it—'Owe no man anything.' Francis Guion, I am in your debt, and I always pay a debt when I have the wherewithal."

He paused, and standing with folded arms, held his chin in his thin hand. A look of wonder came into his face.

"Francis Guion, do you not hear what I say? I am telling you that I am going to pay my debt, but you do not speak."

He came round from the foot of the bed and stood at my side. Then he doubled up with laughter, dancing about the room, holding his sides while he shrieked with mirth. It was some time before he came back to the bed again, and then, pointing at me with his lean fingers, and speaking as it were between bursts of glee, he said:

"Why, he's gagged. Look you, some one has not only bound him hand and foot, but stopped his mouth so that he can not speak. Oh! I would like to hear him scream while I pay him that long-standing debt. It would add to my pleasure to hear the good young man beg and pray for mercy. 'Tis no pleasure to thrash a log of wood. The fun is in hearing him tell you how it hurts, since he so richly deserves it. Now, Francis, I'll take this wretched thing away and then begin."

He bent over the bed as he spoke, and with deft fingers untied the knot and set me free to speak. I essayed to do so, but my tongue was swollen, and my mouth was hot and dry, so that I could not do more than make a sound, which caused Peter to laugh again. He went to the foot of the bed, where he leaned over and gazed at me, his face beaming with childish delight. But he suddenly altered his attitude, and the laughter died away. His eyes changed their look of amusement for one of wonder. With quick movement he came to the bedside again, and bent over me.

"Good God!" he cried, "'tis not that rogue Guion, but my kindest friend; he who has given me a thousand kind words, and dealt with me as tenderly as my mother would have done." Bending over me, he kissed my swollen lips.

"Water!" I gasped, but I doubt whether the word was plainly spoken. He understood, however, and dart-

ing across the room, brought a jug which stood upon the floor, and held it to my lips, so that I drank eagerly.

"What have they done to you, Master Blomberg?" he asked, while he carried the water jug back and placed it in its old position.

"Loosen my bonds, Peter, but tenderly," said I, with such readiness as I had at my command.

"Ah, that I will," was the response.

The knots were more than his fingers would untie, but seeing the dagger on the floor, where it had fallen in the scuffle the night before, he snatched at it, and speedily the keen blade severed the cords at my hands and feet, and I was free to move.

For a moment my brain reeled, and I thought my senses would fail me; but by an effort I withstood the threatening unconsciousness, and essayed to move. It was impossible. I was stiff and in pain after so many hours of torture, so that I sank back with a groan.

"What can I do for you?" asked Peter, with concern.

"Go and tell my sister that I am here, and how you found me," I answered faintly. "Not that way. It is bolted on the outside," I added, when my deliverer went to the door.

Peter turned quickly to the open window and was gone; but before long I heard him mounting the stairs, shouting as he came, "This way! this way! he is here!" This was followed by the sounds of the heavy tramping of men who came up at a run. I heard the bolt shoot back, a furious blow upon the door, the crashing in of woodwork——

But no more.

CHAPTER V

INTO THE LION'S JAWS

MANY a day went by before I was quite at my ease. The cords had been bound about my hands and feet so viciously that I could neither stand without help nor hold so much as a pen. Time, however, set me right, and by the autumn I was in the full throng of trade, and as lusty and vigorous as ever.

During that enforced rest I had ample time to turn over in my mind the possibility of placing my business in safe hands, and doing as thousands of citizens throughout the Netherlands were bent on doing when the proper time should come. That was to take an active part in the final and decisive endeavour to turn the Spaniards out, "neck and crop," and claim the country as our own—which it had been until it was betrayed and sold by our former rulers.

One evening the burgomaster came in and stayed a while. The talk was on the subject uppermost in our minds—the unwillingness of the prince to undertake the full sovereignty of the Netherlands in spite of all entreaties, and his strange eagerness for the people to accept the Duke of Anjou in his stead.

"And what will the people do?" I asked.

"Refuse him, or anyone else on earth, so long as the prince lives," answered Master Adrian vehemently. But he turned from the topic abruptly.

"Bertrand, have you set your house in order?"

I looked him in the face, as if I would read into the reason for the question, and saw that he had come to bid me enter on active service.

"I can go whenever you give the word, Master Adrian," I answered. "To-night?"

"Not to-night. The day after to-morrow the councillors will have papers ready, and you will carry them to the prince, who is now at Rotterdam."

He rose to go presently, but halting at the door, bade me be at ease as to the safety of the household.

"I will make them my especial care, and should Hans Ryholt want advice during your absence, he will be always welcome at my house."

What wonder that the people of Leyden loved the brave old burgomaster so? For his whole soul was bent on lightening men's burdens, although he had cares enough of his own.

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I have no need to say anything of my journey to Rotterdam, for nothing of any note transpired. The old perils had died out largely, and travelling was more secure in that part of Holland, by reason of the fact that Alexander Farnese, Duke of Parma, had drawn his soldiers south, concentrating them in the neighbourhood of Brussels, while he decided on a plan of campaign by which to crush out the rebellion.

The prince saw me immediately on my arrival, but his appearance startled me. I had not seen him since the day when he entered Leyden to take part in the festivities which followed the raising of the great siege. That was seven years before.

While he stood with the evening sunlight playing on his face, I found it difficult to believe that the famous man who was before me was not yet forty-eight years of age. I had looked at him scrutinizingly on entering the room, thinking that the figure at the window was that of an aged councillor. The hair, which in his younger days had been dark brown, was white, or nearly so; the face now turned toward me, while finely shaped, was deeply furrowed; the back was that of a soldier, straight and trim, but bent at the shoulders; and there was a look of anxious inquiry, as though any newcomer might bring news that was not good.

A pang of regret passed through my mind when I gave my papers into the prince's hand and saw that it trembled.

Was it from fear? Did he have a passing thought that this was but the ruse of an assassin, who sought to win the rich reward promised in the ban? But a glance into the face of William the Silent showed that I had wronged him by such a thought. He trembled, it is true, but it was from bodily weakness; for with the constant strain which the cares of state imposed his health had given way. Yet in his brown and thoughtful eyes there was a dauntless courage which no anticipation of assassination would abate. He lived in perilous times, and braved the dangers with the same heroic spirit which had caused him to venture rank and wealth in the great endeavour to break the power of Spain. Cardinal Granvelle, when urging the king to publish the ban, had said in Philip's private chamber at Madrid:

"The prince, your Majesty, when he hears of this, will be scared from what he calls 'the post of duty.' A sum of money would be well employed in this way, and as William the Taciturn is a vile coward, fear alone will throw him into confusion."

The king had nodded assent, yet none knew more than they that a braver-souled patriot than the Prince of Orange was nowhere to be found the wide world through.

Many of the tasks which followed in the prince's service were full of peril, since they took me to cities which had Spanish garrisons, and more than once I had a narrow escape of falling into the hands of the Blood Council. It taxed all my dexterity to maintain my freedom, but I succeeded in doing so. After a time the most perilous of all my journeys was undertaken—a ride to Brussels in order to place certain letters in the hands of the Spanish viceroy.

"Andrew Meerman shall go with you," said the prince, when he asked me if I would undertake the mission, to which I consented instantly, although I confess that my heart leaped at the anticipated danger. "He is a skilful

swordsman, like yourself, and knows the country well, so that between you there will be no fear of your being lost."

It was easy to see, as we rode along, that the people had lived and breathed in the atmosphere of war. We were constantly passing old farmhouses which were castellated and built low and of massive structure, not a window facing the country, but every one opening into an interior court, which was shut in by gates that would only open to the battering blows of heavy guns. Here and there were low hills, surmounted by windmills, such as one often saw in the moeres and polders of Holland, and at long intervals were castellated mansions, many of which bore traces of war. Then, again, I wondered at the plodding industry of the men who lived in those parts, for, in spite of the perilous days, men tilled the soil, and by dogged perseverance had transformed sterile sands and thickets into fertile fields.

"What a glorious land, Meerman, if only the Spaniard could be turned out of it, and the people could follow up their own sweet will," I exclaimed more than once, when I saw amid all the tokens of industry the desolation which the oppressors had wrought. My companion, slow of speech, nodded his head by way of acquiescence.

When we reached Brussels our real trouble began. We were stopped at the gates, and challenged to show our papers.

"I am envoy from the Prince of Orange," I answered. "Do not hinder me, but show me where I may find the duke."

The officer looked at me with some surprise.

"You come, sir, with much assurance, if you think that we receive anyone from that rebel prince on equal terms," was the rough response.

"And you, Sir Spaniard, have still more assurance in daring to hinder me when I demand audience with your master as an envoy of the Prince of Orange. Allow me to pass."

My bold words—and unwise ones, undoubtedly—irritated the Spaniard considerably.

"Show me your despatches," he demanded angrily.

Drawing from my doublet the letter which my master had given into my care, I held it before him, so that he might read the inscription.

"Pass on," said he sullenly, doubtless regretting that he dared not run a sword through my body, rather than suffer me to enter at the city gate.

Not knowing where I might find the governor, I asked for a guide who should lead me without delay to the place where I might obtain audience of the duke.

"Find him for yourself," exclaimed the officer, turning on his heel.

Spurring our horses, we rode up the street toward the old ducal palace of Brabant, where we supposed we should find the duke, and which stood in stately grandeur on the summit of the hill that occupied the centre of the city. Presently, however, a horseman galloped up from behind, and saying that he had been deputed to act as guide, led the way without any further words.

When we passed along the streets the artisans—most of them armourers or tapestry workers—were pouring out of the shops, so as to go to their homes. Seeing us pass by, bearing the badge of the Prince of Orange, they halted to watch us, and when we came to the spot where the throng was thickest, and our progress somewhat impeded in consequence, the men raised loud cheers for the prince, while some called out to us to know how he fared. The Spaniard who accompanied us scowled and drew his sword, but the brawny armourers bade him sheathe the weapon, or it should be worse for him. A thousand to one were odds too great even for the most insolent, and the soldier thrust the sword back, while his horse forced a way through the crowd.

We were received at the palace gates with the utmost contempt, alike by the officers and the common soldiers. Indeed, there was no insult, it seemed to me, which they did not show us.

"Who are you, Sir Fleming, and what may your business be?" cried an officer, coming up to me with mock courtesy.

"I am an envoy from the Prince of Orange. As to my business, it is with the Duke of Parma."

"That may be, sir, but you can not see him."

"But why, pray?" I asked, as quietly as possible.

"Simply because you will not be admitted to his presence," was the curt rejoinder.

Led by a company of soldiers, who were armed to the teeth, we were ushered into the guardroom, where Meerman and I were made the butt of all the ribaldry and insult which the common soldiers chose to deal out to us. When I had endured as much as my patience permitted, I beckoned to an officer who was standing near one of the windows which looked out on the rich country that surrounds Brussels.

"What is your will?" said he, as he came to me.

"My will is either to be admitted into the duke's presence or be suffered to return to my master."

"You can do neither," he answered decisively. "You are a prisoner," he added, looking at me shrewdly, to see how I took his words.

"A prisoner? I, a duly accredited envoy, a prisoner?"

"Pardon me, you are the envoy of a rebel prince—of one whom men are at liberty to injure in property or in life; and by the ban itself, since you are allied to him, you have no protection."

That was true, and I knew full well that in undertaking this mission I was running into the lion's jaws, as it were, and neither my life nor that of Andrew Meerman was worth an hour's purchase. But I had my safe-conduct, and the prince had told me what to do in case I should be discredited. Hence, while the man's decisive words greatly disturbed me, now that I was put to the test I faced my difficulty boldly.

"Go and tell your superior officer that the Prince of Orange holds many Spanish prisoners of note, and that they are detained as hostages for my personal safety and that of my companion here."

"Ha! is it so?" responded the man with a flash of anger in his eyes and suppressed fury in his voice, when

I showed him the long list of those whose names my master had written down and attested with his own hand.

"The duke will know it so when he sees the names, and still more will he be convinced when he reads the despatches I have brought to Brussels," said I, less disturbed when I saw the change in the other's demeanour.

Leaving the guardroom, he was away some little time, but presently a page appeared, and standing at the door, called out to us impertinently:

"Come this way."

We followed the lad along the many passages of the palace until we came to the great hall, the walls of which were hung with the famous Arras tapestries, the richest, the most perfect, and most valuable hangings then in existence, and renowned throughout Europe. We were in no mood, however, for noticing this beautiful decoration, nor did we care just then for the other embellishments—historic scenes and allegorical representations, frescoes, and the like—which made this old chateau famous far and wide. Our hearts were too full of anxiety as to how our mission would fare among so many and such relentless enemies.

I turned to look at Meerman. His face was stolid, and he displayed no emotion. He was loyal to the backbone, and would count it right if he died in the prince's service. But small time was given us, either to wonder or to fear, for we were greeted by the officer who had ordered us to be taken to the guardroom. He was standing just then with his back against the great fireplace, but while he spoke he stepped forward impatiently and flung at me what seemed a devilish glance—no uncommon thing on the part of Spaniards when Flemish cattle, as they chose to call us, were near.

"Why did you not tell me all?" he cried, his face aflame with anger.

"Do envoys tell their business to all whom they meet?" I asked quietly. "You sought for no explanation, and I gave none."

The Spaniard stamped his foot on the ground, and his fingers played with the dagger at his belt. My words

had stung him, but I had no care for that, and added quickly:

"It was sufficient to know that I came from the prince, and that any errand on his behalf must be of first importance, even to the Duke of Parma."

This was high-handed conduct on my part, but I saw no reason why I should show the white feather. Once started, I was strongly tempted to go further, and was on the point of threatening to report him; but Meerman must have divined my intention, for he put his hand on my arm, and said under his breath:

"Softly, Master Blomberg. Do not press the man too far."

"Follow the page," was the only response of the officer, who turned on his heel and looked into the empty fireplace, as if we had not been present. The lad himself walked on with easy insolence, humming a ballad much in vogue with the soldiers, scandalous in its insinuations concerning the honour of the men of Holland. Under his guidance we stood before long in a handsomely furnished room where Alexander Farnese, Duke of Parma and Governor of the Netherlands, was seated.

I had heard much about him, but had never seen him, and as he sat there, at the table which was strewn with papers, I saw at a glance that my master had in him an astute opponent. He was about thirty-six years old at the time, and although he lounged in his chair, one could see that he was a warrior to his finger-points.

On my entrance he lifted up his face and looked at me a while, then rose to his feet. One could well have fancied then that had the days of the Cæsars returned, when the struggles in the arena at Rome drew from every part of the empire the most stalwart gladiators, he would have been in their number, rank or no rank, by virtue of his love of combat. I could understand why it was that in his younger days he wandered through the streets of Parma after nightfall, challenging those whom he met, and adding constantly to his long list the names of those who owned themselves beaten in the combat. Women called him handsome, and so, indeed, he was. Yet there

was something repellant—I can scarcely say what. He glanced at me with his dark eyes, and the look seemed to pierce me through, as if to read into my mind for motives behind the smallest word or slightest action. Then again he turned to scrutinize Meerman, but while doing so he looked askance at me. His restless hand went to his forehead, and was passed over his close-cropped hair, which appeared to bristle at the touch.

"What may your business be?" was his question presently.

"I have brought this, your Excellency, from my master, the Prince of Orange, and other messages by word of mouth, which he has not deemed well to put on paper."

"You must be a bold young man to come hither on such an errand. Do you not know of the ban issued against that illustrious prince?"

This was said with a sneer, and there was a sinister look on Parma's dark face.

"Yes, your Excellency."

"And you must remember, therefore, sir, that the King of Spain forbade any of his subjects to communicate with the Prince of Orange in any way, either openly or in private, or to give him drink, or food, or fire?"

"Yes, your Excellency," was my answer, straightforwardly spoken, for I was not going to disown one to whom I, in common with all my countrymen, owed so much.

"Then what hinders me from ordering you and this man to a dungeon?" he asked sharply.

"This, your Excellency—that the prince, as the letter sets forth, holds Spaniards of rank as hostages for our safety," was my bold response.

There was a quick flash of anger in his dark eyes, and an oath escaped his lips.

"This accursed prince foils us at every turn!" he exclaimed in tones which sounded like a snarl. "Give me your despatches," he added, his dark face darker yet with anger.

He took the package from my hand, breaking the seal half savagely. Soon the contents so absorbed him that

he forgot our presence, commenting, as he paced the room to and fro, in passionate sentences, on what the prince had written. One long and weary hour we listened to him, angered beyond expression at the insults which were contained in those sharp criticisms, and at the hatred they displayed for one whom all my countrymen idolized. But what could I do—or Meerman? What, but to stand and hear and be silent, lest a word should bring us to our doom?

Presently the duke stood at the table, and throwing the papers down, looked at me haughtily.

"You may retire, and come hither to-morrow at noon. But look you, sir. See that you do not fraternize with the turbulent artisans of the city, or it will be worse for them and you. Were it not for these noble Spaniards whom your rebellious master holds you should be hanging at the city gate within the hour."

"With your Excellency's permission I will seek a lodging with Councillor Maas, who lives in the Bodenbroeck," said I.

"Be it so. But guard your conduct well. Otherwise, hostages or none at all, I will hand you over to the common hangman."

CHAPTER VI

A STREET AFFRAY

WHEN at noon on the following day I again waited on the governor I was told that I must remain in the city a while, and in a few days Doctor Elbertus Leoninus, Professor of Louvain, together with Hugo Bonte, ex-Pensionary of Middelburg, should accompany me to Rotterdam, where they would treat with the prince.

But those intervening days were full of peril. The insolence, too, which was shown at my second visit was so much more marked that the sense of insecurity increased greatly. On our way back to our lodgings Meerman and I called at an armourer's shop, and bought each a coat of chain mail, which could be worn under our doublets.

"That will be some sort of safeguard, Meerman," said I, as we donned the armour; and that same night we found that we had done wisely in taking this precaution.

We had been visiting a citizen whose acquaintance I had made, and were returning in the darkness. Entering the square which fronted the Cathedral of St. Gudule, we were met by a number of Spanish soldiers.

"Halt!" cried the leader, who stood before me with drawn sword.

The light of a lantern hanging from the house close by fell on his face, and I knew him instantly as the officer who had treated me so cavalierly during my first visit to the ducal palace. There was a look on his face that meant mischief, and I spoke instantly, drawing my sword at the same time. Meerman also drew.

"I would have you beware, for you must know full well that we have a safe-conduct from the duke."

The soldiers hesitated, and more than one prepared to slink away, as if fearing to violate the assurance given to me by the governor.

"What care I for that?" was the Spaniard's response. "Ten crowns for the man who draws blood!"

That reassured the hesitating men, and they gathered around us while their leader made a lunge at me. Fortunately I was on guard and parried the thrust, and then a furious fight began. It was so desperate that Meerman and I, standing with our backs to the wall, fought for dear life, with cut and parry and thrust in such quick succession that one could scarce see the movements of our swords. Two soldiers lay moaning on the stones, but we were growing spent with such odds against us. But for our coats of mail we should have been thrust through and through. They were our salvation in this unequal fight of two men against six. Even with those lying at our feet, *hors de combat*, the odds were yet two to one, and had it not been for timely succour, the issue must have been fatal to us.

A company of armourers—stalwart Flemings, with muscles of iron and not an ounce of superfluous flesh—were passing by, going homeward after some extra toil which had kept them later than usual. Without waiting for any call from us, they joined in the fray with lusty good will, and with sheer weight of numbers rushed on the fighting Spaniards, bore them down, and wrested their weapons from them. Then, taking off their leathern girdles, which were heavily buckled, and were therefore formidable instruments of torture, they belaboured the soldiers until they cried for mercy. Only when they were tired did the armourers cease their punishment.

When the Spaniards slunk away, writhing in pain and swearing horribly at being thus maltreated by "Flemish cattle," as they called the honest fellows around me, a sharp pain in my left shoulder assured me that I was sorely wounded. I staggered for a moment when I sought to thank the men for their help, and stumbled

against one of them; but he held my arm in his strong grasp, and I recovered from the passing faintness.

"You shall come to my home hard by, master, and my wife will dress your wound," said he kindly; and I was glad to accept his offer.

There was no one in the room when we entered, but the man, going to the foot of the stairs, called up to his wife:

"Kate, come down and dress this gentleman's wound, and be not slow about it, for he is a countryman of ours. If I mistake not, 'tis the messenger from the prince, of whom I spoke to you yestere'en."

A pleasant-faced matron bustled down, expressing sympathy even before she saw me—I could hear her doing so at every step—and before many minutes had passed she had my shoulder stripped, and was busily washing the wound. It was such that she could bind it readily, and that done, she bade me sit by the fire and rest a while before I essayed to journey to my lodgings.

We were soon engaged in busy talk on that all-absorbing topic—the ban against the prince, and the losing game which the Spaniards were playing. Apart from that enormous price on the prince's head, the popular cause was more promising than it had been for many a long day. The great hindrance to triumph was the parsimony of the cities in the southern provinces, whose councillors were eager enough to be freed from the Spanish yoke, and longed to see the back of the last minion of King Philip, but begrudged the necessary money wherewith to wage the fight for liberty.

I have often thought—and we expressed the thought while we talked on in the armourer's house—that the parsimony of our countrymen in the south prolonged the struggle, and afforded the Spanish forces a hundred opportunities to effect our ruin. Had the southern cities but done what those of Holland and Zealand had done—given the Prince of Orange a free hand, their whole confidence, and an ample subsidy—Parma would not have had in the country, as was now the case, an army of sixty thousand men, and the Inquisitors a license to walk the streets and rob the citizens of their dear ones.

Meerman was emphatically expressing his own feelings on the matter, bitterly exclaiming against those sleuthhounds of the Romish Church who had brought him sorrow, when some one stumbled at the doorstep. The latch was lifted a moment later and a man entered, closing the door after him. The others looked up, and the housewife, reaching round to draw a chair toward her, said, as I thought, reluctantly:

"Come hither and join us, Martin. 'Tis but a gentleman who has been wounded in a street scuffle, and I have been tending his injured arm."

I had sought to turn, like the others, to look at the newcomer, but was so seated that I must needs look over the injured shoulder. The movement caused me pain, so that I desisted, and waited until the man came forward, with a peculiar step which struck me as being familiar.

"What news, Martin?" asked the armourer, with affected cheeriness.

"None," was the almost surly response; but the tone of voice startled me, and I looked up quickly at the man who was gazing into the fire, while he drew up his chair and sat down.

"What may this be?" I cried at the first glance, and springing to my feet, heedless of the sharp twinge which the hasty movement caused me.

The man turned. His muddy-complexioned face became pale, his lips parted in astonishment, his eyes stared in affright—it was a look of deadly fear, as of one caught in the very act of horrible crime. He spoke not one word, but stood there, I know not for how long, every one in that fireside group looking at him in wonder. Once he lifted his hand to his lips, but it trembled so that he dropped it to his side again, and still stared on, turning ashy gray, and then to a livid hue that was dreadful to look upon.

At last, while I gazed at him, with fierce anger in my heart, and contempt displayed in my face, he faltered:

"Peter Bakkerzeel told me that you were—DEAD!"

He said that last word with a hysterical scream; then, stepping backward while he spoke, and throwing the chair behind him to the floor, he dashed across to the door, which he opened while he cried frenziedly, "DEAD!" A moment later the door banged behind him, and he was gone.

It was Francis Guion.

CHAPTER VII

THE FAMILIARS IN THE FOREST

NEARLY a week passed before word came that we were to start for Rotterdam, and by that time my wound gave me little trouble. In the meantime we had looked high and low for Guion, but in vain. Nor had anyone seen him that we could discover. When, however, we reached the courtyard of the palace, ready, according to arrangement, to begin our homeward journey, I caught sight of one whom I could have sworn was the would-be assassin. He had his back to me, but that mattered not. I knew the short and slightly stooping form, that peculiar twist of the shoulder which I had noted a hundred times before, and which would enable me to swear to his identity among a crowd, even though I could not see the face. It was Guion, without a doubt. But it was not possible to get at him, nor wise in such a place to attempt to do so. The sight of him, however, among the prince's most inveterate enemies, served to make me unspeakably anxious.

I now turned my attention to those who were to be my companions as far as Rotterdam.

"What does that look on Bonte's face mean, Meerman?" I asked, when the ex-pensionary glanced at us while he prepared to mount his horse.

"I can not think, Master Blomberg. Whether it means mischief in the city or on the road I do not like it, so we must needs be on the alert. Are your arms ready?"

"Yes," I replied, assuming an air of coolness which in no sense reflected my real feelings.

A few minutes later the trumpets sounded, and the

cavalcade set forth, Meerman and I riding behind the commissioners, and followed by half a score of well-mounted Spanish troopers. It was an hour after sunrise when we started; for undoubtedly the duke had timed our departure so that the journey through the streets of Brussels should take place when they were comparatively empty, the artisans having already gone to their day's toil. Then there would be no demonstration on the part of the people, who had been by no means cowed by the cruelties that accompanied the suppression of the last rising. It was more and more evident that trouble was in store for those who were following up the cold-blooded brutalities which were directed by the king; and the seditious whispers we had heard in Brussels were indicative of a terrible revenge, whenever the opportunity should serve.

There was a scowl for us and a grave salutation for the commissioners when we rode out at the city gate, but we did not suffer that to trouble us. When we reached the green fields and breathed in the fresh spring morning air our spirits lifted, and every yard of our advance added to our confidence, since we were apparently leaving danger farther and farther behind us. The surroundings of the city were very beautiful, and Meerman and I—left severely alone by the others, so far as conversation was concerned —spoke in low tones to each other, while we rode past the cornfields and through the rich pasture land, of the good time coming, when the laggard cities would join hands with those who had already thrown off the yoke, and drive the tyrants across the border or into the sea.

Not far from Brussels we entered the great forest of Soignies, which teemed with animal life. Once or twice, when we rode into the densest portion of the forest, a huge brown bear, grubbing for roots, was surprised, and went into safety with a heavy swing and a grunt of discontent. Occasionally a pair of timid roes would take to flight, as also would wolves, boars, and wild cats, on the advance of so large a party. Then at intervals came open stretches, into which the bright sun shone, adding beauty to the greensward.

At the close of the day we came to a monastery, which the Spaniards entered, intending to rest there for the night. We, too, made as though we would pass in, but Doctor Leoninus, halting, held up his hand.

"No heretic must pass within the doors of this sacred house," he exclaimed sternly.

"Then where must we find shelter?" I cried.

"That is your concern and not mine," was the curt rejoinder.

The Spanish troopers, hearing the professor's words, laughed loudly, and thrusting rudely past us, entered the monastery. When the last one rode in the gates slammed together, and we heard the bolts thrust into their places by those who were within.

The prospect was not a pleasant one—to spend a spring night in the open forest, cold, hungry, and exposed to the savage beasts that prowled around. To thunder on the gates was useless; to ask for food was more than our pride would suffer us to do.

"Let us try to find a woodman's cottage before it grows dark, and, after a rest, go on and leave these churlish Spaniards to find their way to Rotterdam as they may choose," said Meerman.

"A good suggestion," I observed.

For an hour or more we looked around us, leading our horses by the bridle, but all to no purpose; but when we were beginning to resign ourselves to the risk of a night's sleep in the forest, I saw a curling column of smoke rising against a bit of sky just visible.

"That means life of some sort," I cried, pointing it out to Meerman, who had wandered away in another direction. He came up at my call, and when we drew near we saw a woodman's cottage standing back from the bridle path along which we had been travelling.

"What say you, Meerman, shall we ask for shelter there?"

"Yes, Master Blomberg." And so saying, my companion stalked up to the door and beat upon it loudly.

"Who goes there?" came a call from within.

"Two travellers seeking shelter."

"Then go to the monastery, sirs."

"We can not. They will not let us enter."

At this the door was slowly opened, and a rough-looking woodman appeared, blocking up the doorway with his huge body, as if none should enter without permission. As soon as he saw us he exclaimed:

"Flemings! Come in, sirs, and welcome! I thought it was some of those accursed Spaniards, who claim a man's goods and food without so much as saying 'By your leave.'"

"It was because we were not Spaniards that they refused us shelter at the monastery," said I, when the woodman drew aside, and we entered the cottage.

"I will see to your horses in a few minutes," the man answered, on our asking him where we might put them; and after he had laid such food as he possessed upon the table—rough provision, but good—he bade us eat and be welcome, and went out to look after our tired steeds. That done, he returned, cleared the table, and sat down with us.

In the middle of our talk a sound came which set us listening. A clear voice was heard, singing the old Dutch ballad:

"Beat the drum gaily, rub-a-dow, rub-a-dub;
Beat the drum gaily, rub-a-dub, rub-a-dow;
Beat the drum gaily, rub-a-dow, rub-a-dub;
Long live the Beggars! is the watchword now."

I looked at our host in astonishment. I knew the voice and knew the song, but wondered whether I was dreaming. I was well aware that Peter Bakkerzeel disappeared from Leyden for weeks together, and that he was known to stray to Rotterdam and distant places—even as far as Antwerp he had been seen; but I had never heard of his having extended his wanderings thus far.

Oom answered my unspoken question.

"'Tis a half-witted one whom people call Peter Bakkerzeel. He comes this way at times, and finds his bed in yonder corner. But I wish he would not sing that song so boldly in these parts. More than once he has been

beaten by some ruffian Spaniard, but I wot he had his revenge, and gave back two blows in payment for every one received, so soon as opportunity came."

The song had ceased by this time; then came the sound of a hand feeling on the door for the latch, but when it lifted, and the door was found to be bolted inside, a heavy kick followed and the well-known voice cried:

"Peter is here! Hasten, Ambrose Oom, for I am in sore need."

Oom sprang to his feet, and going to the door, opened it speedily, when the simple one entered without delay. But his appearance and the song he had been singing belied each other. His "Beat the drum gaily" had made one think of him as coming down the forest path leisurely, as though he had all night before him; but now he came in with a bound, and his whole action was expressive of excitement. The tangled hair hung over his eyes, which peered through the long strands wildly. When, after bending forward eagerly, and trembling with excitement, he glanced round the chamber, and saw that there were strangers present, he lifted the hair with his thin hands, then burst into wild laughter.

"Oom, 'tis Bertrand Blomberg, of Leyden, my truest friend! He knew that I should want him, and came hither. Ah! 'twas kind of him! Come, Master Blomberg! Ay, and come, Ambrose Oom! And you, sir, albeit I do not know you," he cried, pointing a finger at Meerman. "Come! for God's sake, come, or she will die! Those devils who sent my mother to heaven, away from me——"

His voice broke, and sinking to the ground and burying his face in his hands, he wept, swaying to and fro as he sat on the earthern floor.

We did not speak to him, for Oom whispered to us to let him have it out. Suddenly, brushing his eyes with his sleeve and looking around the hut again, he sprang to his feet, and laid a hand on the woodman's shoulder.

"Oom, come! She will die! They will carry her to the Holy House! Ah, I know them! They took my mother there!"

Saying this, he went to the door, flung it open furiously, and bounded into the night.

"This way!" he cried, standing in the light that streamed through the doorway of the hut, every limb seeming to quiver, his feet impatiently moving on the soft earth, and his eyes flashing, while he brushed the hair back from his forehead.

"He is in earnest," said Oom, "and he never yet befooled me. Will you come, sirs?"

"Yes," I cried, making for the door. "Lead on, Peter, and lose no time."

There was no need to speak thus, for our guide dashed forward into the darkness, and was lost to sight. We could hear him, however, singing his old song, and it betrayed his locality at once. Now and again he would come back and urge us to greater speed. In responding to his frantic appeal, we had more than one serious fall, by reason of the tree roots which stretched across the path, or because our feet became entangled in the undergrowth.

"How far on, Peter?" asked the woodman presently, when the simple one came back with the old entreaty to hasten.

"Not far now. They were making for the monastery, and I fear me may be nearly there by now."

Just then the high wall and the gateway whence we had turned in the twilight of that same evening showed out against the sky, and through the trees which encircled this clearing in the forest the moon began to show. Going to the gate and falling on his knees, looking intently on the ground, as if to search for footmarks, Peter kept silent for a few moments; then, rising quickly, he exclaimed in little more than a whisper:

"We are in time. This way!"

Turning full to the right, he ran down a forest path. Being early springtime, the leaves had barely begun to burst, so that the moon had freer play, and made the way visible to us who followed our guide. The silence was only broken by the occasional call of a night bird, or the scream of a wild-cat, so that while we hurried on our footfalls were plainly heard.

Peter, who had gone forward, returned with stealthy bounds, coming upon us so unexpectedly that we almost fell over him.

"Now on your toes. I have seen them. Come through this bunch of trees, and you too shall see them."

Going slowly, and with the utmost caution, we approached a spot where the moon lit up a little space. Before one of the trees upon the farther side stood a woman, with her arm uplifted, in readiness to strike. With the moonlight falling upon her, I saw that she held a dagger in her right hand. A thin dark streak showed on her face, starting from her heavy hair, and it was easy to believe that it was blood slowly trickling down. At her feet lay something black—we knew not what, but from the groan which came now and again we were convinced that it was the body of a man. Before her, and hiding most of this thing upon the ground from us, were two forms, robed in black and cowled. There was no need to ask who they were, for their garb betrayed them. They were Familiars of the Inquisition! They were gazing on this woman, whose pale face turned to right and left every succeeding moment, as if to watch and be ready for aught that these Inquisitors might do. But not a sound came, save the groaning from the prostrate man and an occasional quick, sharp gasp from the maiden, almost a hysterical sob, as of one who was overwrought, and could not much longer hold out in this fight which she had begun.

While we were going with stealthy tread, one of the Familiars made a step forward with uplifted hand, as if to snatch at the maiden, but she brought her dagger round swiftly, and the man, receiving the stroke in his arm, leaped back with a loud cry:

"Accursed heretic!"

He had scarcely spoken when he fell to the ground with a piercing scream. Meerman had bounded from among the trees and across the greensward, and as the black-robed one swung round in pain by reason of the woman's blow he struck at him. I saw the gleam of steel, and knew, when the Familiar fell, that my comrade had buried his

dagger in the man's body. Thank God, the disabilities were not always on the side of the oppressed!

The second Familiar turned to his companion, startled by the further cry; but whether his face blanched with terror or not when he saw three men with gleaming weapons before him, I can not say. This was certain, that he trembled, and his voice faltered when he essayed to speak. Suddenly an unearthly sound caused us all to turn.

Peter was standing, with bent body and hands outstretched.

"My mother's murderer!" he cried, his hands opening and closing convulsively. "It was such a fiend as he who came and took her from me! He sought to send her to hell, and put her to the rack, but when he had done with her she fled to heaven! Oh, murderer, give me back my mother, my darling mother, of whom you robbed me!"

He was in a frenzy, and his voice rose high and shrill on the night air, while his body swayed. His face showed pale and ghastly as the moonbeams played upon it, and his eyes almost started from their sockets while he stared, as if he would see beyond the cowl of the Familiar. Before we were aware, he made one wild plunge. His arms folded around the Inquisitor's neck, the poor creature's thin legs seemed to wind about the black-robed figure; then, when Peter swayed his body to and fro, as if to overturn the other, the man staggered backward, and fell upon the sward with a heavy thud.

"For God's sake have mercy!" he cried. "Help me! He is strangling me!"

Peter held on, drawing his arms together with deadly force, tighter and tighter, heedless of the blows and tearing snatches which the Familiar made in that desperate struggle to be free.

I have often wondered, since that night, whether we ought to have dragged Peter back and sought some other way of punishment, but at the time our hearts were steeled against the cries for help from one who had doubtless led many a poor creature to the torture house, and

had willingly watched the tormentors at their dreadful work. Poor Peter did not distinguish between this one and the hundreds of his order who had wrought such misery in the land. He thought, in his half-mad way, that these were the same three who had carried his mother away, and now that the chance for revenge offered, he seized it.

"'Tis fair enough," said Oom, standing stolidly by. "The man is double Peter's size, so let him fight it out."

Almost while he spoke Peter rose to his feet and looked down on the now still body. Then he knelt again and listened for the Familiar's breathing. When he found that the man was yet alive he rose once more. The frenzy was gone, although, while he stared at each of us in turn, there was yet a wild look upon his face, such as I had never seen before.

"My mother knows that I have paid part of the debt. I will come again, and pay the other part in full."

So saying, he stooped to pick up his knotted stick, and then danced wildly, leaping over the bodies of the Inquisitors, and spurning them repeatedly with his foot, or bringing down his club with all his force upon them.

"You have saved me, and I thank you from my very soul," said some one at my side, and the voice was very soft.

Looking round quickly, I saw a sweet face, so turned that the eyes were gazing into mine. It was the face of one whose age was twenty years or thereabouts, round and pleasant to look upon, but pale. There was a streak of blood across it, the blood coming slowly from a wound which one of the Familiars had inflicted. It was the girl who had been waging this unequal fight for liberty against the tormentors. Her lips trembled while she gazed first at me and then at my companions; then she swayed a moment and raised her hands, as if to catch at me and save herself from falling. Before I could throw my arms about her she fell to the ground and lay there, senseless and still.

"'Tis Caroline, daughter of Pierre Hesselaer," cried Oom, when I stooped and lifted the maiden's head so

that it rested on my bosom. "We must be gone! Master Meerman, help me, and we will carry these men out of sight, lest they should be discovered too early and tell their tale."

Responding readily, Andrew stooped with Oom, and in a short time the Familiars were set down side by side amid the undergrowth, far removed from the pathway. Leaving them there to shift for themselves when their senses should return, my companions came and stood before me, to aid in carrying the senseless girl into safe hiding.

"I will help you, Master Blomberg," said Meerman; but, rising to my feet, I lifted her in my arms, and bidding Oom lead the way by the shortest route to the cottage, followed him with my burden. It was not an easy task, for the path wound in and out among the trees whose crawling roots made the footing insecure in places where the moon's light was sparing. Peter, going before, halted at every spot where there was any chance of stumbling, and saw me safely over it, before he went ahead to look for a new difficulty. We did not venture into the open space which fronted the monastery gate, but kept within sight of it, flitting, as it were, from tree to tree, and one by one, so that had any been on the watch they were scarcely likely to see us.

Before long we were within the hut, the door of which Oom bolted, to keep out those who might be astir.

CHAPTER VIII

A DASH FOR FREEDOM

Such gentleness as three men could show, and the ready aid of Peter, sufficed to bring back the fainting maiden to consciousness. After a little while, revived by the wine which Ambrose Oom took from the cupboard, she was able to tell us what had befallen her that night.

Her father was away from home, and she, left in the great mansion with the retainers, was, as she thought, in safety. She had been sitting before the fire, engaged in her favourite occupation, that of lace-making, when she heard the door open without the usual inquiring knock. Looking round quickly, she saw the doorway blocked by three Familiars, one of whom advanced to speak when she rose tremblingly to face her visitors.

"What is your will?" she gasped, her face stiffening with horror.

"You must come with us, my daughter," said he who was coming slowly forward, almost with noiseless tread upon the floor.

"But why?" she asked, full of mortal terror, and holding to the chair beside her lest she should fall.

"You shall know at the proper time," was the stern answer.

There was no alternative but to accompany them. Tears never had any softening effect on those iron-hearted creatures of the Inquisition, and knowing this, Caroline Hesselaer bravely held them back, although her eyes grew dim.

"Give me time to go to my room and dress, for the night is cold, and I am but thinly clad," said she.

"Then do so at once," was the curt response; and as she mounted the great staircase, the Inquisitors followed silently, their stealthy tread being in itself a terror, which seemed to rob her of her self-possession. A quick prayer for help put courage into her heart, and while she dressed, a daring plan suggested itself to her mind. Moving to and fro, she had caught sight of a dagger in one of the drawers, and, quietly concealing it in her dress, unknown to the men who were standing motionless and watchful between her and the door, went on with her preparations for the journey through the forest. At last she turned and bade them lead the way.

The great hall looked deserted when they slowly passed across it, but Caroline was almost unnerved when she heard the stifled sobs of some of her women, who had withdrawn from the sight of those dread visitors. They dared not show themselves, so great was the horror which the black-robed ones everywhere inspired. Men and women, whenever the Inquisitors searched for their prey, were paralyzed, and went to meet their fate as sheep go to the slaughter. The thought of resistance might have come to some at times, but it was set aside as madness, a futile attempt to escape the inevitable. I believe that when men and women faced the Familiars they were as the poor bird is that has the serpent's gaze upon it. The awful fascination draws it to its doom.

Crossing the courtyard, the little party passed through the gateway, and entered the forest, in which the Inquisitors found the path by the aid of their lanterns. Sometimes Caroline's courage failed her, and she feared that she must needs go up to the monastery gate without a bid for liberty; and that meant death, or torture, which was, perhaps, more terrible.

What could she do? One girl against three men who had everything on their side, whose very appearance inspired dread, whose revenge, if she failed, was too terrible to contemplate—what could that one girl do against such? And yet, if she went tamely she would die; or, taking the most favourable view of her fate, she would never again walk out into God's clear air and experience liberty.

She came with them presently to a bit of greensward—an open space in the midst of the forest, and she knew it well. The monastery was not far away, and it was now or never. Once before she had thrust her hand into her bosom, and felt the handle of her weapon; but she had not courage to draw it forth. Those three black forms, showing up dimly in the scanty lantern light, looked too many for one girl to withstand. They might be armed—she did not know. A dagger thrust from them, the tear of steel through her bosom's flesh, would be her death. She could not do it, and she must needs go on. Again, when she came to this open space, her hand slipped into her dress. When she thought that death was sure to be her fate whether she failed or fought, she resolved on fight, and drawing forth the weapon, stood at bay. While she did so, a figure darted across the open space—she thought it the figure of a lad who sang, as he went, the ballad her serving men were wont to sing, and her maidens, too, when there were no Spaniards near:

"The Spanish Inquisition, without intermission—
The Spanish Inquisition has drunk our blood;
The Spanish Inquisition, may God's malediction
Blast the Spanish Inquisition and all her brood!"

She knew who it was. She knew the voice that had often sung the Dutch ballads in her father's hall—Peter Bakkerzeel, the simple one of Leyden.

Peter lingered, and sang the song through, and the party halted involuntarily, the Familiars turning toward the singer with angry words. It was Caroline's opportunity. Their backs were toward her, and she sought to escape. She had already got as far as the nearest tree when there was a loud cry, and then a fearful blow which made her stagger and fall. A Familiar had flung his lantern at her while she fled, and for the moment she was stunned. But only for a moment. She was on her feet by the time they came up with her. They saw the flash of her weapon, for she had held it fast, although she had fallen so heavily; but one of them, treating the matter lightly, came on her with a malediction, and sought

to snatch the dagger from her. But she was quicker than he, and drove the weapon home into his bosom, so that he fell and lay at her feet groaning.

How long the struggle lasted she could not tell. Peter had dashed in among the trees with a wild cry, and then there was silence but for the night sounds of the forest. For a time the Familiars sought to close in upon her, but standing with her back against a tree she held them off, the dagger flashing whenever they drew near. Then they began to temporize, but she demanded absolute liberty, which they would not listen to. She should go with them and be treated gently, if she would but give up her weapon.

"Gently?" she answered incredulously. "Would the tormentors treat me gently when they knew of that thing lying there?" she cried, pointing with her left hand at the groaning Inquisitor. "You would put me to greater torture, and I will not surrender. I will go free, or die here. Ha!"

One of the Familiars had made a lunge at her, as if to take her unawares; but she swept her dagger round while he came forward, and he only saved himself from deadly harm by stumbling across the body of his companion. From thence he rose and stood at the other's side, waiting for an opportunity, while they both cursed her, then entreated, then promised. The strain of that long contest was intolerable, and she thought that in the end her strength would fail her, and the struggle be futile.

At last the moon lit up the space, and among the trees behind her foes she saw Peter Bakkerzeel coming forward madly. He held up his hand as if to encourage her, but did not speak, and then went back into the black shadows again.

We knew what followed, and bade her say no more, for her beautiful face was wet with tears, and her lips trembled by reason of her intense excitement. For a time no one spoke a word, neither had we noticed that Peter had left the hut.

"What think you, Master Oom?" said I at last. "Are we safe here?"

"It all depends on the Inquisitors—whether they managed to crawl to the monastery to give the alarm. Not one of them was dead, and there is the bare possibility. 'Twould be best, I think, to be gone, and take Mistress Hesselaer with you."

Oom had scarcely spoken when the door opened and Peter appeared, his eyes ablaze with excitement.

"Begone for your lives, and take the lady with you!" he cried. "A score of men are on the way, and many a monk with them; and I heard them saying as they came that they would murder Oom and all whom they could find, because of this rescue. I heard one bid them make sure that Master Blomberg and his serving man were killed outright. If I mistake not, 'twas Hugo Bonte's voice."

Jumping to our feet we buckled on our swords and rushed out of the cottage, Caroline taking my hand. Following Oom, whose form showed up plainly when the moon lit up the spaces among the trees, we came to an outhouse where he had lodged our horses.

"Mount, friends, and fly for your lives!" cried the woodman.

"What about yourself and Peter?" I asked.

"We can find a quiet spot to hide in," he answered, while we emerged from the stable with our steeds.

He had hardly said these words when three men came dashing along the pathway we had lately traversed, their drawn swords glancing in the moonlight. Swift as an arrow, so it appeared to me, Oom darted forward, and raising his heavy quarterstaff, struck the first-comer a terrific blow, which laid him prostrate. The next, coming on so swiftly, fell across the body of his comrade, being unable to save himself in his headlong career. To strike a man while he is down is in general cowardly, but circumstances at this time warranted the blow which crashed upon him from the staff which the woodman brought down with awful force, from which it were strange, indeed, if the man ever recovered. The third halted when he saw us, three to one; then turned, and fled to his companions.

"Have you a horse?" I cried to Oom. "You dare not stay here now."

"Yes, but he is in the outhouse in the forest, a quarter of a mile away. But I'll suggest something better than that. Peter, fly like the wind to the house where Mistress Hesselaer lives, and bid them have her horse ready, and two others saddled also—the swiftest they have in the stable. Tell them why."

Peter was away almost before Oom had finished. Turning to us, the woodman bade me mount, and Meerman; then he lifted Caroline Hesselaer to the saddle in front of me, where she sat with my arms encircling her. That done, he sprang up behind Meerman, and gave the word, pointing out the way.

"We must needs go round about, but since our pursuers are all on foot, and will not know our destination, we shall distance them," said he, and Meerman spurred his horse.

Caroline clung to me while we followed, darting out from among the trees into the open country. Behind us came shouts and curses which only served to quicken our pace, the good horses, fresh and vigorous after their rest, bounding forward, little heeding their double burdens. Caroline, looking back over my shoulder, told me what she saw.

"They are standing at the forest's edge as if they take council, Master Blomberg. But since they are all on foot, they will not trouble us. On, my good horse! On! away from those accursed tormentors!" And she patted Laurens's neck, as if to encourage him to greater speed.

Passing out of sight of the angry mob behind, Oom directed our course along the forest's edge, until we came to a broad pathway among the trees.

"Come, sir, this way!" he shouted, and we galloped forward, the horses' feet falling on the soft earth with quick thuds, making light of the undergrowth and projecting roots, while we who rode bent our heads continually to avoid blows from the low-hanging branches. When we emerged from the forest we saw an old mansion, at the gates of which stood three horses, saddled, and Peter seated on one of them, waving an unsheathed sword, which he had appropriated while the stablemen

were preparing for the journey. With a woman's ready wit the old housekeeper caused a bundle to be fastened to one of the saddles, and when we had crossed the open space, and Caroline Hesselaer had mounted her own horse, the woman said :

"I have put up a few garments for your use, my child. Now may God speed you, and give you deliverance."

CHAPTER IX

THE PRINCE'S GUESTS

LOSING no time, and quitting the beaten road to take the byways, we came at last to Rotterdam, and finding the prince, told him of our reception at Brussels, and our experience in the forest of Soignies. The story caused his face to grow red with anger.

"Such unworthy foes!" he cried impetuously, and in a manner so much out of keeping with that wonted calmness which won for him the name, alike among friends and foes, of William the Silent. "Surely those Spanish commissioners will not have the audacity to come hither now! And yet," he added, with anxiety overshadowing his furrowed face, which soon resumed its usual paleness, "and yet I would fain see them, and come to terms if it be possible. When last they came we could not agree, and their suggestions were an insult to my manhood. But heed not, Master Blomberg. You and Meerman are two brave fellows, and have served me well. I would that all would serve me so. Come with me, Mistress Hesselaer," said he when he had so spoken, and holding out his hand to Caroline. "I will take you to the princess, who will extend to you a hearty welcome, and find you a safe home until you may return to your father's house. But," he went on somewhat sadly, "I am afraid, my child, that that will not be yet."

Four days later a body of Spaniards, flying the white flag, rode up to the city gate and demanded an audience with the Prince of Orange.

"I will take you to him, gentlemen," said I, when, hearing the voice of Doctor Leoninus, I stepped out of

the watchman's house and confronted the commissioners. They knew me at once, and Hugo Bonte muttered something, while both of them turned livid with confusion.

"Follow me, gentlemen," said I, when they hesitated. "Have no fear. The Prince of Orange respects the envoys of the King of Spain, and would see that they are treated with courtesy. None will hurt you here, for your persons are sacred, and you will receive no harm."

Laurens was standing near, impatient after so much inaction, and mounting him I led the way, leaving them to follow with what feelings they would.

The prince was seated at his table, busy as he ever was with the affairs that most concerned the welfare of the people.

"May it please your Highness," said I, when we entered the room, "I bring into your presence the commissioners from the Duke of Parma. As I told your Highness, I lost them in the forest of Soignies, on the way from Brussels."

They winced at the words, but I went on:

"Here are Doctor Elbertus Leoninus, Professor of Louvain, and Hugo Bonte, ex-Pensionary of Middelburg. They came with me as far as the forest of Soignies, but there we parted company."

I confess that I took a mischievous pleasure in repeating this, while well aware that I ran the risk of a sharp reproof from the prince for being so ready with my tongue. I shall not easily forget the confusion which covered the faces of those men. They understood the sneer which accompanied my words, and possibly judged themselves in danger, since they measured their position by what a Spaniard would have done under similar provocation. Nor shall I forget the scorn, alike in the words of my master and in his face, when he addressed them. Hidden behind his quiet manner were fire and energy, as they had reason to know.

"You come as commissioners from the Duke of Parma, gentlemen, but you are like your royal master and the viceroy," he exclaimed, his voice trembling with suppressed emotion. "What trust can I have in deliber-

ating with you when you violate safe-conducts, and seek to murder my messengers?"

What followed I do not know, for I quietly left the audience chamber, so that I might not intrude upon the business which was in hand.

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The days that followed were important ones alike to the Spaniard and the Netherlander. Conferences took place frequently between the commissioners and the prince, and many weeks passed by in this way, messengers going to and fro with my master's safe-conduct, so that the Spanish envoys should know the will of the duke concerning certain grave matters in dispute.

But other things transpired also, which touched my own thoughts and feelings as they touched no other person's. That ride from the hut in the forest had been almost entirely in the company of Caroline Hesselaer. Meerman and Oom rode side by side, sometimes to the front and at other times loitering behind, to be assured that we were not being followed. As for Peter, he was with us all in turn, and then far away, riding ahead and out of sight, calling, perchance, at some cottage, to have a chat with an acquaintance—for Peter was a favourite wherever he was wont to wander, and always welcome. He never wanted for a meal, and had never any need to spend a night in the open. His voice was not his only passport, for his simple pleasantness, and the news he brought, many a time telling of a sinister design of Spanish soldiers, thus enabling some to escape a startling danger; his willingness to perform a small service, provided his erratic spirit did not turn him off his errand—these things made him certain of a cheery word, and a hiding place whenever he was sorely pressed by the Familiars, who were resolute to put a stop to his singing the Reformation hymns, or to his carrying the notice round to villagers of some field preaching.

But he did not intrude upon us greatly during the ride, so that Caroline and I, much in each other's company, had opportunity for speech, which gave each of us a knowledge of the other. What she thought of me I

could not tell. So far as personal appearance went I was as stalwart as most, good-looking enough to pass in a crowd, as Aunt Materin was wont to say, a powerful, broad-shouldered young fellow who could hold his own when it came to fighting, softened in manners more than many, because at home there were three women to tone me down, as it were, and rub off rough corners. For, after all, a woman's hand is wonderfully dexterous in smoothing away a man's natural uncouthness; and when three women, each of different dispositions—for I am counting in Martha Sweveseel as well as my aunt and sister—have their turn in moderating one's habits and tendencies, that sort of thing goes for something, and does a man great good—makes him gentler, a little more thoughtful, less selfish. When men rub shoulders with each other there is largely a contest as to who shall come off best, and that tends to selfishness, perhaps to lack of generosity. It is the opposite of that when you are much in a woman's company.

What did Caroline think of me during that ride, and after? I am sure I can not say. I know how, more than once, she turned her face to me and thanked me for having come to her aid.

"'Twas Peter who brought us, and Oom and Meerman were as much concerned in the rescue as I," was my response.

"It may be so," she answered, "but in some way I have grown to associate my deliverance more with you than with them, which, perhaps, is ungrateful, for, like you, they had everything to lose when opposing those awful Familiars." And this she said so prettily, until she named those creatures of the Inquisition; but the thought of them made her stop suddenly and shudder.

She thanked me, talked pleasantly, told me of her home and friends, her general way of life; spoke of a hundred things which, unknown to her, displayed her character. But, as I have said, what she thought of me during that ride, and after, I can not tell. Hitherto, of all the women in the world my sister came first, for I was heart-whole until I met Caroline Hesselaer. Now,

while my sister was as dear as ever, Caroline took a place no other woman had taken in my heart before. Dangerous as the journey was, alert as we had to be lest instead of finding a safe abode at Rotterdam we might be taken to a dungeon, I could have been glad had it gone on and on, so long as it was travelled with Caroline at my side. I told her so when we were little more than a mile away from Rotterdam.

When she looked round at me quickly there was a flush upon her cheek, and her dark eyes glistened. She was not angry because I had told her that her companionship was so pleasant, and that she had grown very dear to me, for had she been displeased she would not have smiled.

"I shall never forget the ride, Master Blomberg. It will remain in my memory, not simply because I was flying from death, but because I had the pleasure of your company." And she put forward her hand and laid it in my own, while she thanked me yet again. I wished that she had done more, or said more.

We did not say good-bye at the city gate, nor when the prince presented her to his wife, and practically made her one of the household. We met many and many times, and sometimes walked through the streets together, devising a scheme whereby word could be sent to tell her father that she was safely lodged at Rotterdam. If ever I had been away for three or four days she met me with a smile that set me thinking, and with a pleasant easiness that made me hope that I was more to her than the other men with whom she came in contact. Once, when it was known that my journey was certain to be of exceptional peril, she came to say good-bye. She put up her hand to me at the house gate, and when I stooped in the saddle to take it in my own, she said:

"I will pray for your safe return."

Would she have said that to Antony Schetz, with whom she had been talking when I rode through the courtyard toward her? I thought not, and shook Laurens's rein mechanically, thinking more about that handshake and of those words than of the danger I might meet with on the road to Antwerp.

Coming back from that journey late one night, I rode through the iron gateway which led into the grounds surrounding the prince's palace—if the plain red-brick building could be called such. On throwing Laurens's reins to the stableman, I passed into the hall where Antony Schetz was standing with three or four others, chatting away to pass the hours during which they were on night duty. They gave me a hearty greeting, and Antony, quitting the group, walked with me to the room where the gentlemen of the household usually disrobed.

"The prince is in bed, Bertrand, but left no orders that you were to be sent to him on your arrival. I think he will be glad to see you early to-morrow, for he desires, I know, to be quit of those two Spaniards who are proving to be a source of much vexation to him."

"I will see him as soon as he is ready to receive me, Antony," I answered; "and from a word dropped here and there while I was in Antwerp, I do not think the prince will need to be much longer troubled with his guests."

"'His guests,' you say. Then you have heard?" said Schetz quickly, while I threw off one of my heavy riding boots.

"Heard what?" I asked, looking up.

"That they are staying here, under the same roof with the prince."

"'Tis madness!" I exclaimed, my other boot half off, and my face, I suppose, expressive of astonishment.

"So do many of us think," responded Schetz. "Had it not been that the prince might have deemed it impertinent, I would have remonstrated; but, kind as he is, he does not suffer us to take so great a liberty as that."

"It would be better to risk his censure, Antony, than risk his life," I retorted.

"At any rate they can not hurt the prince while he sleeps, for a soldier is always on guard; and during the daytime there are always plenty around who have their eyes either on Leoninus and Bonte, or any others who may want to earn the reward offered in that accursed ban."

"If I were the prince," said I, rising and standing before the fire in stockinged feet, "I would insist on the withdrawal of that murderous edict before I would treat with them. Ay," I added angrily, "and if they made demur I would bundle them out of the city, neck and heels."

"'Tis what we all say," answered Schetz, nodding a good night, and leaving me to find my way to bed.

When I mounted the stairs and paused at the corridor in which the prince's room was situated, I looked down it, and saw a soldier standing erect and watchful, with sword unsheathed, ready to hinder any who should dare to attempt an intrusion on his master's privacy. So had I seen the men on guard night after night, not one of them slackening in his vigil, since his own liberties and those of his countrymen so largely depended on the safety of him who led the way in the desperate fight now waging for civil and religious freedom, and against a despotism which was as sanguinary as it was shameful. My own room lay in the opposite direction, and turning that way, I walked down leisurely and thoughtfully, my feet, being stockinged only, falling silently on the floor. Another corridor crossed this one at right angles, and turning to the left I passed on, entering my room, which was in darkness, save for the feeble light in the fireplace. But this I cared not for, and I felt too weary to trouble myself about lighting the lamp.

As it was, I flung myself, dressed, upon the bed, and gazed, while I lay there, at the flickering logs upon the hearth. Then I fell into a reverie which was the sure prelude to sleep. But presently I looked up quickly. A lifting of the latch was followed by the opening of the door; then some one entered, but so silently and with such stealth, that I began to think some mischief was afoot. I could hear the man come forward, and, judging from the sound which followed, he sat in a vacant chair, but in such a position that while he could not see me, neither could I see him without rising on my elbow and stretching forward, so as to gaze through the half-drawn curtains at the foot of the bed.

I did that just as the firelight flickered brightly, so that I had a full sight of my visitor. But the light went down as suddenly, and comparative darkness followed. If I was not dreaming, I had looked upon the face of Francis Guion! I could have sworn it. The fellow was dressed in Spanish costume, like the men who accompanied the commissioners from Brussels, and none but those who knew him intimately could have recognised him.

He looked around uneasily. I could barely see the movement of his head, because the flames had sunk so low, but I was all alert, and saw more in consequence than I should otherwise have done. Yet if I had any doubt as to his identity, his voice was sufficient to remove every vestige of it.

My first impulse had been to leap from the bed and lay hands on him, but the next to slip on to the floor on the dark side, and with drawn dagger await events. Then came the voice, although it was nothing but a low muttering. That, however, was Guion's habit, and almost peculiar to him.

"I must have come into the wrong room," he was saying. "But Hugo Bonte told me to come to him, taking the sixth door on the right after leaving the main corridor."

A pause followed, during which the man's feet moved uneasily on the floor. Then he spoke again, and in the stillness, and by reason of my keen hearing, I caught the words easily enough:

"I will try the next room."

Saying this, he rose from the chair and crossed quietly to the door, which he drew behind him as he passed out.

I followed instantly, for I was resolved to see the end of this thing if I could. The prince was safe for the night, since the soldier was on the watch; but it was just as well that I should have some knowledge of the scheme on foot, and be ready to frustrate it if it were possible. The corridor, when I slipped out, was in darkness, as it had been when I came along it some time before; but a moment later a door opened, the light streamed from it,

and I saw the ex-pensionary's shadow fall across the passage floor, and the face of Francis Guion as the light fell full upon it.

"You are late, Guion," said Bonte, in a low voice, and with a certain impatient annoyance.

"I crave pardon, señor, but I miscounted the doors, and entered the wrong room, so that I lost time."

"Come in," the other responded, somewhat irritably; and when Guion had entered the door was shut, so that I stood outside in the darkness.

What next could I do? I waited at the door, listening eagerly, warranted in playing the spy, since my master's life, and the weal of the Netherlands, depended on what I might discover. As for the eavesdropper who will pry into matters that do not concern him, I despise him from my very soul; he is certain at some time to prove a snake in the grass. But when great issues are at stake, when pains and penalties threaten by reason of one's ignorance, I think it no shame to learn what can be learned, since one may hinder sorrow or prepare men to meet it.

My listening served me to little purpose until Hugo Bonte's voice rose above the low murmur that came to my ears monotonously.

"I will not listen, Guion, to your evasions. The prince must die to-morrow, and since your courage fails you here, let it be when he rides along the Hoogstraat with us. He promised to do so in order to show us the alterations he contemplated making to the Dam."

What followed I could not hear, but I walked along the corridors to the prince's door. The man on guard called on me to halt, which I did, and told him what I had heard, bidding him be vigilant lest even yet the plan might be changed.

Too restless to sleep, although I tried to do so, I left my room and went down to the hall to spend an hour or two with those who were on duty. Two or three men were there, sitting on chairs drawn up to the hearth, their backs turned to the hall itself. Seated thus they did not see what I saw. By the blazing light of the roaring fire

I saw some one creep out from the shadows at the foot of the staircase, and stealthily, but rapidly, cross the floor to the great outer doorway.

It was Guion!

There were old pieces of armour hanging on the walls close by me. Knowing that Guion would get to the door before I could reach him, I shouted aloud:

"Stop that man!"

Then, snatching from the wall an old battle-axe, I hurled it with all my strength. It flew through the air with terrific speed, and dashed against the door with a crash at the moment when Guion reached it, and had put his hand upon the latch. Had he been a few inches more to the right he must have been brained on the spot. As it was, it just missed him, and fell to the stones with a clang.

Guion drew back with a cry of fear, but seeing the men at the fireplace leap to their feet, he made a dash at the door, lifted the heavy latch, and the next moment, leaving the door half opened, he was gone.

CHAPTER X

A SCORNFUL REJECTION

THE morning was foggy, and the mist so dense that one could scarcely see across the street. When I sought the prince, to tell him the result of my mission to Antwerp, and what I had seen and heard during the night, I found him depressed, and as he sat at his table he was dull and listless, with very little energy, and none of the grave cheerfulness which sat so well upon him. Instead of his usual quiet confidence, which became contagious, he held his pen idly, gazing, as it were, into vacancy, and with a cold and solemn look upon his face. Now and again a hollow cough showed that he had not thrown off the illness of the winter, and knowing how it shook his frame, I watched him anxiously.

He caught my eye at last and smiled.

"You look serious, Blomberg."

"Yes, your Highness. I do not like that cough. We had hoped that when the winter went, that, too, would have gone."

"Have no fear. It is a remnant of the fever which laid me low years ago, when we were preparing for the relief of Leyden. Strange to say, whenever I am unusually anxious this cough troubles me, and of late it has been particularly trying."

"Then I fear, your Highness, that you are more than usually worried just now?" said I, somewhat diffidently, for I did not wish to be intrusive, much less inquisitive. I wondered whether he had heard of the night's doings.

"It is so, Blomberg," he answered, rising from his table, and going to the fire to warm his hands. "These

two commissioners make me anxious. With all these conferences we make no headway, and meanwhile I feel that we are losing precious time. They are too friendly, I fear, and so mean mischief, as they did when last they came, if you remember, while I was at Leyden. But this shall be the last interview, for if they make no abatement in their demands they shall go at once, and the Duke of Anjou shall become the sovereign lord of the Netherlands. But what about your journey to Antwerp? Have you brought the reply of the Broad Council?"

"Yes, your Highness. But since the commissioners will wait upon you shortly, may I first tell you what transpired during the night?"

The prince stood pale and stern, but said not one word concerning my story while I told it. When it was ended he turned to the fire and gazed into it, as if considering the course he should take. Presently he opened the letter I had given into his hands, and read it intently and with evident satisfaction.

He looked up, and was about to speak when a knock came on the door, and a page appeared.

"Doctor Leoninus and the ex-pensionary, your Highness," the lad announced.

"Admit them," said the prince, going back to his table, on which he flung the letter. "Nay, do not go, Blomberg. I would have you hear what is said, since I am likely to send you on a journey, when full knowledge of what is transpiring will aid you in bringing your mission to a successful issue."

He spoke thus because I had turned to quit the chamber; but hearing him say this, I stood back to listen in silence, and meanwhile the two envoys entered.

"Good morning, gentlemen," was the prince's greeting. "I pray you be seated."

It was said with courtly grace, but there was a stern look on my master's face. As the Spaniards sat in the chairs which the page had placed, they looked at me as though they expected me to quit the chamber, but after my master's words I did not move. I was convinced in my own mind that he desired me to stay by reason of that

night's experience I had told him of, and it was well that he should not run more risk than was necessary.

"May we not see you in private, your Highness?" said Hugo Bonte. "Our business this morning is for your ear alone."

"The presence of Master Blomberg may count for nothing with you. It is my wish that he should be in attendance, so I pray you speak freely," responded the prince, throwing aside his listlessness, and now in full readiness to discuss such questions as might arise.

As the talk proceeded, I was astonished at the change in his demeanour. The pale face, lined with care, and eyes dark-rimmed, and body limp, as though helpless through illness, all changed, and the prince was now the eager statesman, maintaining his people's cause with a vigour and skill that made me realize more than ever how truly great he was. It was marvellous to note how he met suggestions from the crafty envoys with wiles which more than checked them, and made them bite their lips with vexation at being thus frustrated in this great and subtle game of diplomacy. And when they told him of the vast resources of the Spanish Empire, and that the king was resolute to crush out the rebellion, come what would, he answered:

"The king may press us sorely, but liberty is the inalienable right of my people." Then, with slow emphasis, every word having its full weight while he spoke, he added: "And we intend to achieve it!"

"But bethink you, your Highness, of the terrible suffering that must come to the people by this fatal persistence," said Doctor Leoninus. It was said in a tone almost approaching insolence, and there was an undisguised threat in the words and manner.

"Can there be more suffering possible than your king has already inflicted upon my people?" responded the prince, sternly, for the implied threat had not escaped his notice. "Who is it that has turned the Netherlands into a shambles? Who is responsible for the quiet streets of the cities, grass-grown and deserted, the empty harbours, the crowded dungeons of the Holy Houses—say, rather,

the vestibules of hell!—the hideous look of our orchards, where men's bodies hang instead of fruit, the empty money chests, and the appalling misery? Who? Your own king, who has pressed the people without mercy, and handed them over in the mass—two millions of them!—for the Inquisitors and the Blood Council to do their murderous will upon them! Gentlemen, you have been here many days, and all our discussion has been of no avail. I must pray you, therefore, to be gone, and I beg you to see to it that you be not in Rotterdam after sunrise to-morrow, for if you be here when that hour is gone your safe-conducts shall not serve you!"

The prince rose to his feet, as if to intimate that the interview was at an end.

The envoys looked each into the other's face with something approaching consternation, for these assertions were unanswerable; and when the prince made as though to ring the bell for the page to enter, Doctor Leoninus stepped forward almost involuntarily.

"We have yet one thing more to say, your Highness. The king has sent a messenger direct from his capital in Spain, and we must needs ask you to listen to his message. The man who brought it entered Rotterdam at an early hour this morning, and we must beg you to hear it ere we go."

"Say on," responded the prince sternly, resuming his seat, and waiting to hear what the purport of the king's letter might be.

Doctor Leoninus drew a bulky document from his bosom and opened it on the table, so as to have the points named by the king before him. He was about to speak when Hugo Bonte interrupted him, and pointed in my direction.

"Send this young man away, your Highness. We wish to speak for your ear alone."

I looked at the prince, as if to await his will in the matter.

"I have told you already that Master Blomberg's attendance is agreeable to me, and desirable, also," he answered decisively.

The faces of the envoys coloured. Doubtless it occurred to them that the prince bore in mind the fact that no less than four attempts had been made to assassinate him. They must have remembered also that interview in Hugo Bonte's bedchamber, and the contemplated murder in the afternoon of the day in which this conference was proceeding. Could they believe other than this, that the prince might construe this desire to be with him alone to be but a further wish to do him bodily harm, or force him by threat and violence to make concessions? Whether it so entered their minds and my master's I do not know, but it did so enter into mine, for my hand wandered to my belt, and I loosened the dagger in its sheath, even doing the same with my trusty sword, devoutly hoping that the opportunity would come to use the weapons on the vindictive emissaries of the King of Spain.

But as the event proved, the commissioners had no designs against the prince's body during the interview. It was rather the murder of his reputation that they sought.

"Then listen, your Highness. In this letter from the king—written by his own hand—he bids us express his warm affection for you, and his strong desire to maintain your friendship and counsel, even as it used to be."

I looked at my master, for this was an outrage. He sat there, his fine face full of scorn. His eyes flashed, and he half rose from his chair, then sat back again, saying :

"His warm affection? What of the ban that has been nailed up in every city and village throughout the land?"

"The king regrets his haste and weakness in listening to the unworthy counsel of Cardinal Granvelle," interposed Leoninus hastily, looking into the prince's face to see how he would accept the explanation.

"Then is the ban withdrawn?"

"It will be without delay," came the commissioner's answer. "But may I proceed?"

"Proceed," was the laconic response.

"The king desires us to offer you the princedom of Asturias. He also states that we are to say that you

shall have the rentals of the province of Castellon de la Plana, together with a fifth of the revenues of its seaboard, which, being in the Mediterranean, will yield great sums yearly. You are also offered full pardon for your late desertion of the Spanish cause, and for your open rebellion against the king's authority."

The commissioner paused to turn another page of the letter, and was about to proceed when my master interrupted him.

"Have you any further offers to make in the king's name, Doctor Leoninus? For, if I remember aright, all these were made to me when you were both here some time ago, and you must know that I rejected them."

"Yes, your Highness, that is true. The king holds to all the offers previously made, although you rejected them unwisely, as I think; but he also makes further offers, which exceed in generosity anything yet named."

"Then I pray you pass them over for the moment, and tell me the conditions for all these honours, and this proffered wealth, which is, indeed, princely."

"Would it not be better to hear the whole, and then it might aid you in your decision?" interposed Bonte eagerly.

"Pardon me, I will hear no more if you do not now state the conditions," said the prince, whose lips set closely when he had spoken. His furrowed face had grown pale, but whether by reason of the tempting offers, which were much to this hunted and impoverished and maligned man, or from suppressed anger, I could not tell.

"The conditions?" said Leoninus, turning another leaf of the king's letter. "Let me see." So saying, he ran his finger down the page. "They are these," he added, when he stayed at a certain point: "That you should call the Netherlanders back to their allegiance, and withdraw your aid absolutely, either in matters of counsel and encouragement, or by financial subsidies, and the hiring of troops."

"And what next?"

"That you must suffer Spanish garrisons to occupy the

cities whence, by your aid, they have been driven, and yourself retire a while into Germany. Moreover——"

"Hold!" interrupted the prince. "You waste my time and your own. You must know that those are the conditions I refused before. Now tell me the penalties, if I again decline these overtures." My master's face was yet more haggard and pale, as I had never before seen it in its most anxious moments.

"Then—and I grieve to say it to your Highness—the old pains and penalties which have been pronounced against you continue in force," answered Leoninus.

"Outlawry?" asked the prince quietly

"Yes."

"Degradation, so far as Spain can bring it about?"

"Yes."

"The confiscation of my estates?"

"Yes."

"Excommunication?"

"Yes."

"Assassination?" asked my master, leaning across the table, his eyes glancing from one to the other of the two commissioners, who quailed before his steady gaze.

"The king says not so," cried Hugo Bonte.

"The ban says so!" was the rejoinder, in sharp, decisive words.

For a few moments there was a silence, which the prince broke.

"The ban says so, and Doctor Leoninus and Hugo Bonte said so last night, when they agreed with Francis Guion to murder me in the Hoogstraat this afternoon!"

He spoke with withering scorn, and although his hands trembled while he played with his pen, the words rang out decisively, so that the two commissioners cowered before them.

"Go, tell your royal master that the Prince of Orange will stand with his people, or fall, as the will of God may be. Now get you gone! If you be in this city at sunset, your heads shall be forfeit. Master Blomberg, see that these men be not in Rotterdam after the hour

I have named. Should they be still within the gates, arrest them."

So saying, he rose to his feet, turned his back upon them, and left the room.

Following out the prince's instructions, I went that afternoon to the apartments where the commissioners had lodged, and conducted them to the city gates, which, as they rode out, closed behind them noisily, as though the wardens were glad to be quit of their presence, and it was not in my heart to chide the men.

On inquiry I found that one who answered to the description of Guion had left Rotterdam at sunrise.

CHAPTER XI

KING STORK

TIME went on until the tenth day of February arrived, in the year of our Lord Fifteen Hundred and Eighty-two. For months the Netherlands had been throbbing with excitement, and, in order to please the prince, the people had yielded to his wish and accepted the Duke of Anjou as their sovereign, although in their own hearts there was the greatest discontent.

The French duke had been in England for a long period, pressing his suit with Queen Elizabeth, but apparently without winning her consent. Rumour said that the queen had a handsomer man in her mind, one whom she would have married without a moment's hesitation if some of her subjects had not protested boldly. I mean the Earl of Leicester, whose influence over her was so great that he was practically master of the business of the state. Be that as it may, Elizabeth had not married the earl, and neither said "Yes" nor "No" to the duke.

That was how matters stood when the tenth of February came.

On that day a fleet, flying the flags of France and the Beggars of the Sea, put into the harbour at Flushing. The gray stone jetties were crowded with citizens, in spite of the drizzling rain which fell persistently. Cold enough without the drizzle, it was one of those days when a shiver passed alike through Nature and all who had ventured from their firesides, while to add to the general wretchedness a fog settled densely over the distant waters.

"'Tis poor sort of holiday weather, Hans," said one in the crowd that waited the arrival of the squadron,

which had been reported as near at hand, and might be expected to come into view at any moment. "I begrudge having donned my Sunday suit to welcome one whom I wish the Beggars had flung overboard."

"The prince would not be pleased if he could hear thee," responded his neighbour; "and yet I would rather be at my fireside, I will confess, than standing here in this ague-giving mist for the sake of welcoming his Grace of Anjou."

"Now, if 'twere for Father William, I would put on ten holiday suits if it would please him," exclaimed one standing by; "but to dress like this, spoiling my cravat of Flanders lace, and stand here shivering, and be supposed to shout one's self hoarse presently, in honour of one for whom I care not a ryksdaaler—'tis enough to make one swear, only that it were not religious."

"See!" cried another, who, having come no doubt against his will, was resolute to make the best of an unwelcome holiday, "yonder is Van der Werf, the brave old Leyden burgomaster. Ay, and with him come the councillors of the city and the deputies of the States-General. What say you, friend Nicholas, to the goodly show they make in their robes? I would I were a rich man and had my place in the council, for I love gay clothing."

"And when thou hast it thou art like a peacock strutting to and fro," said a stout matron, whose best hood was drawn over her comely face, to keep the drizzle from it.

There was a loud laugh at this, but none laughed more loudly than he who received the snub.

All this was taking place behind me while I stood with Schetz, De Grijse, and others of the prince's household at the top of the jetty steps, where a carpeted space was kept clear for the reception of the new ruler. These bits of byplay were the only pleasant things one could discover that morning, notwithstanding that the whole city had turned out in holiday attire, that flags were hung from various windows, and streamers were flying on the masts of such ships as were in the harbour.

Out at sea, so far, naught could be seen of the fleet, whose coming had been announced by a pinnace which had been sent out to bring in word as soon as the Beggars were in sight. Presently the prince came across the harbour in a barge, accompanied by the princess and some of her ladies, the fairest of all being Caroline Hesselaer.

The fog had lifted considerably, and the rain had ceased when the barge pushed off from the quay. When the crowds that lined every side of the harbour caught sight of the Prince of Orange they raised such a shout of welcome as I had not heard since that day when he entered Leyden after raising the siege. For many a month gone by his face had worn a more anxious look than usual, but as the shouts continued, and cries of affectionate greeting came from all sides, and hands of young and old waved wildly, I saw, while he mounted the jetty steps, that the prince's face was bright with smiles, and he appeared to stoop less. It was as if he had dropped the weight of ten years from his shoulders.

Before long Caroline and I were side by side, and standing in the crowd where none could see us, I took her hand in mine and held it there. Nor did she take it away, but, glancing into my face, with many a happy smile upon her own, she chatted away, telling of many things that had happened of late. And still her hand, so small, rested comfortably in mine, so large. I began to think I had been overcautious in not telling her of my love. I would tell her without fail at the earliest quiet time we had together.

Presently the fog on the sea was broken by the dark hulks and uncertain outline of the sails of the Beggars' ships; and as they came in sight, one by one, growing plainer to the view every moment, the great tocsin rang out its brazen notes, a signal for every church bell in Flushing to follow suit, and to the guns to roar out their welcome from the citadel.

Before long a cry was heard:

"They come!"

All eyes had turned seaward, where a boat was seen putting off from the ship which flew the admiral's flag.

Some, as the boat drew near, shouted their greetings to the new master of the Netherlands. Others looked on in silence, and not a few with grave displeasure. For they loved not this arrangement which the prince had forced upon them. He had been entreated, times out of number, before it was too late, to accept the sovereignty of the states, but his refusal was as persistent as the people's desire was urgent, and this day's proceedings were the outcome of all the persuasions.

Yet there was great curiosity on the part of all to see the manner of man who displaced the Spanish king. Two men of high degree—to judge by the garb they wore—were seated in the stern, and when the little craft drew near enough for the sightseers to scan the faces, a sound as of relief passed through the crowd. For one was looking around on the assembled citizens with curiosity, handsome, alike in face and figure—a prince among men, it was easy to see. About his neck hung a jewelled collar, which showed that its owner belonged to the Order of the Golden Fleece.

"He is good-looking enough," said a matron standing sufficiently near for me to hear her words; "so I will draw back the ill-natured words I spoke about him."

"Thou art in love with his dark eyes, and his haughty bearing and splendid apparel, Martha," exclaimed a burly miller, whose Sunday suit did not disguise his occupation.

"I? I love a fine figure and gay attire, but saw you ever such a face as that? I'm sorry the prince would not be our ruler, but I feel drawn out toward this gallant gentleman."

"God send him to be as generous a sovereign as he looks a noble man," observed an elderly artisan close by her.

"And he has done, I warrant you," said Martha sharply. "Ha! what does that mean?"

The boat had drawn up to the steps, and while the sailors held in the craft with boat hooks, the other cavalier had risen to his feet, and, stepping out, walked up the steps with outstretched hand to greet the prince, who had descended to meet him midway.

"I give you welcome, your Grace, to your new domain," said my master, when the two joined hands.

"Heaven help us! Yonder handsome man is not the Duke of Anjou!" exclaimed the woman, her bright face clouded over and filling with dismay. "Did ever one see such ugliness on a throne? 'Tis little better than a dwarf, with bent shoulders and ugly face. He a duke? He our ruler? Look at him! blotched and pockmarked, with the swollen nose of a drinker, and the lips of a wanton! God save us! 'twas unkind of our good prince to set such a man over us!"

A murmur of disappointment ran through the crowd, for there was little doubt that this was the duke, since the prince greeted him so cordially, while the other received naught more than a stately bow, and having returned the recognition with cynical politeness, stood back as though he had no further concern in the day's doings.

"It may be, Martha, that an ugly face may cover a good heart," said the miller, whose good-humoured banter had passed away.

"It does in thy case, William," the woman responded quietly, "but it never did in yonder man. Look at him!" And she pointed her forefinger at the duke in a scornful manner. "It wants no virtuous woman to spy the look of a debauchee on his face. Nor does one need to ask if he cares more for duty than for wine and women."

"And yet it must be all right," spoke up another. "There is no possibility of our finding anyone so bad as those accursed Spaniards. Besides, the duke is a friend of the Huguenots, and, if all reports be true, he desired the States-General to arrange such safeguards that our liberties shall be secured forever."

"Thou art as simple as poor Peter Bakkerzeel, although, I wot, he has more wit than thou," exclaimed one whose voice I had not yet heard. "Dost forget that one can very easily crumple up the paper on which safeguards are written? Let it lie a moment on the fire which burns at the duke's hearth, and how long does it hold good? 'Tis gone on the moment. Knowing what I know, 'twas a bad day when the prince turned a final deaf ear

to our entreaties to become our sovereign, and it was a grave error of judgment when he persuaded the members of the States-General to invite the Duke of Anjou. Ha! look yonder!"

Those who were about him followed the man's hand when his finger pointed to a stork that was flying across the harbour.

"Yonder bird eats up the frogs in our moeres and marshes without relenting, and that is well. But as for this new prince—Anjou—once our sovereign we shall rue the day, for he will be King Stork to us, devouring, not what we can gladly do without, but our substance, just as the bird of fable did, and bringing to us infinite sorrow."

I looked into the speaker's face, and knew it for that of one of the professors in the university at Leyden. By his side was another, a field preacher whom I had often heard.

"'Tis true, Master Arsens," said this one, when the other ceased. "The duke comes from a God-forsaken court, where men are sunk in the lowest sins. How can we expect good of one who was brought up in a place where the ruling spirit is Catherine de' Medici, who is but a busy witch, brooding over a seething cauldron of wickedness? You are right, Master Arsens. This new ruler will be a veritable King Stork to us, devouring us and our substance without mercy, and when we discover our true condition, there will be no remedy."

"Who was yonder nobleman who came with the duke?" asked Caroline of Master Straalen, when the crowd had dispersed and the prince had departed with his guests.

"The famous Earl of Leicester, whom men say is Anjou's rival for the hand of the English queen," was the answer given, as the old sea captain went down the steps to a boat which awaited him.

CHAPTER XII

THE CORRIDOR

THE days that followed gave me reason to anticipate the future with anything but confidence and pleasure. Caroline was much in the duke's company, since the Princess of Orange frequently accompanied her husband to the Palace of St. Michael, which had been set apart for Anjou and his suite during his sojourn in the city of Antwerp. Caroline, a great favourite with the princess, was always her companion on those visits, but more than once she complained of the duke's attentions to her. He often met her in the corridors, and complimented her on her beauty, sometimes, indeed, asking her to enter his own private apartment, that he might show her this thing or that, which she firmly declined to do. Once, indeed, he took her by the arm and sought to constrain her to do as he desired, but she drew back, and hastened to join her mistress.

The princess lingered on until late at the palace two nights after that, talking with the ladies who had gone thither with their lords or the councillors. Several gentlemen were in attendance, waiting to escort their mistress and her maids through the streets so soon as she should desire to leave.

Tired of loitering in the hall, Schetz and I wandered through the great house, our feet falling softly on the priceless carpet with which the floor of the corridors was covered. The long passages were almost in darkness, an occasional light only enabling one to see the way. There had been times when the corridors were lighted brilliantly, lamps and candles hanging everywhere, so that there was

nothing but beauty by night, even as when the daylight found its way through the numerous windows. It was dark enough now, however.

What we were talking about I do not remember. We were standing in one of the recesses where a window looked out into the courtyard. But presently we stopped in our conversation and listened. Some one was speaking in quick tones, and with no small anger, and I knew the voice at once as Caroline's.

"My lord duke, how dare you molest me thus?"

"Nay, pretty one, I have watched at the door, hoping that you might pass this way, for I desire to speak with you; and since you will not come into my room by fair persuasion, what can I do but take you in, even against your will?"

It was the Duke of Anjou's voice, too plainly his for one to be mistaken, since it was heavy and scraping, like none other I had ever heard.

"My lord duke, this is the second time in as many days that you have molested me, and 'tis not only unseemly, but shameful. If you have aught to say to me say it here, for I will not go into your room."

"But I dare not say it here, pretty one."

Caroline's voice broke in upon the words sharply and decisively:

"Then I can not hear it, my lord."

"In that case you must needs come, whether you will or not," was the duke's response; but the next moment there came a cry, as of some one struggling.

Hitherto we had lingered, scarcely knowing what to do, but at these last sounds we put all hesitation aside, and hurried down the corridor. We had delayed too long, for while we went forward there was one sharp, frightened cry, and then the sound of a quickly closing door. We could only guess which door it was as we approached, for we had not been able to see anyone, although, while the altercation was proceeding, we had peered down the broad passage intently. But there came a stifled sound as we halted at the spot from whence we judged the noise of the closing door had come.

"'Tis here," cried Schetz, while I stood by in a state of uncertainty, wondering which door to try—this, or the next one lower down. Schetz's hand was on the handle, and the door opened partly at his touch. Then came an angry exclamation, and the door slammed in our faces.

It was impossible to suppose that this would suffice to keep us out, and, before anyone inside had the opportunity of turning the key in the lock, we had given a sudden thrust, which not only forced the door open, but sent some one headlong to the floor.

The room was in darkness. Doubtless the duke had put out the lamp so that he might stand and watch for Caroline's coming without being seen; consequently, when we entered thus we saw nothing. We could hear the duke, who lay on the floor, cursing us roundly, whoever we might be, and Caroline sobbing with fear somewhere in the dark chamber.

"Caroline, where are you?"

"Here," came her instant answer. A moment later her hand was in mine, and we turned to go into the passage whence she had been drawn against her will.

"My lord duke," said I, halting, while Anjou was rising to his feet, "you are a scoundrel to molest a lady whom your oaths, so recently taken, should have compelled you to protect and care for. Next time you venture on such a cowardly act, your station shall be no protection to you."

So saying, with Caroline's hand in mine, and Schetz bringing up the rear with clinched fist and angry mutterings, we passed down the corridor to a spot where we could linger, and suffer the weeping girl to regain her wonted equanimity.

Schetz wandered off to a distant window, while I sat by her side in a recess, seeking to soothe her, and asking whether she would go to my sister in Leyden, out of the way of the duke. After a time she wiped away her tears, giving me her hand as she did so.

"Bertrand, I will go to your sister to-morrow, if the prince will permit you to accompany me."

"Come, then, dear one, and when you are in your

own room, and safe from further harm, I will go to the prince and tell him what has taken place, and of your wish."

I had never spoken to her of my love, but here, while she put herself so unreservedly into my hands, I could not resist the impulse which came upon me. We were in the deep shadows, nothing dispelling the darkness but the straggling light of a solitary lamp, beneath which Schetz was standing, out of earshot.

"Dear one, I trust that when you go to my sister it will be to stay in the old home, some day to be its mistress, and my wife. For I love you, Caroline! I love you!" And putting my arm about her, I kissed her lips.

"O Bertrand," she whispered, returning the kiss, and throwing her own arms around my neck, "I love you, too, yes, from my very soul."

She nestled on my bosom without saying one more word. Nor did I wish her to speak. I had had my answer, for the act was more to me than words. In the time of her perplexity and trouble, when she had no one near save myself to enter into the full meaning of her position, she rested there, having confessed her love.

"We must go, Bertrand," she said presently. "But please let no one know what we have said to each other. 'Tis a secret, darling. Enough at present to know that I love you, and that you love me. Kiss me again, and let us go—you to the prince to tell your story, and I to my room to make ready for my journey."

"Yes; one more kiss—and yet another—and one more besides," said I, kissing her again and again, as if to enter more fully into the joy of possessing her.

It was a full half hour before I saw the prince alone, and told him of what had happened. A strange look came into his face—an expression that implied a hope that I was wrong; yet one of deep anger, too, that he who had promised to defend the country and its privileges, and the people's honour with his own blood, should have acted so basely.

"It places me in a painful position, Blomberg. Did the duke see you?"

"I think not, your Highness. The room was dark when Schetz and I burst into it, and the corridor in such shadow through lack of light that none could possibly tell who we were," I answered.

"That was as well. If Mistress Hesselaer is content to be silent on the matter it will be better, since we may prevent a public scandal; but I will certainly speak to him, and if he does not like it—well!" And the prince shrugged his shoulders, while his face looked sterner than it was wont to do. "Bid the young lady leave with you to-morrow morning, as soon after daybreak as possible, and tell her that I will acquaint the princess of her wish, and say her farewells for her. 'Tis one of those cases in which mischief may arise if the thing becomes public property, especially—and I grieve to find it so—since the people do not feel well disposed toward Anjou."

CHAPTER XIII

A MIDNIGHT SEARCH

By the prince's permission I remained a short while in Leyden, so that Caroline had time to get used to her new surroundings before I left her. Those happy days having passed, I returned to my duty at Antwerp, where the prince was yet staying.

But I was not without news of how Caroline fared in her new home, for Peter had engaged, of his own free will, to act as messenger, bearing letters to and fro, esteeming the distance nothing, and his payment more than ample if Caroline smiled upon him, or if I put a few ryksdaalers into his hand.

He would come to me at all hours of the day or night. If he arrived in the daytime, and chanced to find me out, he would wait for hours at a stretch in the hall, taking what food the servants—with whom he was a general favourite—would give him, but keeping an intent watch on the door, so that the instant I appeared he was at my side, whispering that he had news for me. He would be impatient until he could find a quiet moment to draw me to some retired spot, where, with great show of secrecy, he could put into my hands the missive Caroline had sent.

It was touching to see this simple creature stand with clasped hands, watching my face intently while I read. I suppose that his own bearing greatly depended on Caroline's face when he took the letter from her hands, and hid it safely in his bosom. If she had been grave he watched me with anxiety; if she had smiled he stood before me with childish glee, scarcely able to wait for me to peruse the lines, and breaking in sometimes thus:

"Is it not good, Master Blomberg? She looked so happy when she placed the letter in my hands;" or, "I trust the news is not bad, for she was sad when she bade me come to you, and her lips trembled, and her hands also. But let those Spanish devils beware if they hurt the sweet lady!"

Then his face would assume the wild look, and his small hands were clinched, and there was vindictiveness, and words were muttered that boded ill for all who would dare to trouble her.

His coming at nighttime was characteristic. The sentry on guard would offer to let him pass into the mansion, so that he might come to my room and enter by the door, but if he were sure that I was in bed he would shake his head and move away. Close by my bedroom window was an iron pipe down which the waters of the roof ran when it was raining. Peter climbed up to the window by its aid, and clinging to a grinning gargoyle, tapped on the glass until I came and opened it.

"I come from her," was his invariable greeting. "All is well," he would hasten to say, as if he would set my heart at rest, while he climbed into the room dexterously. Oftentimes covered with mud from his journey through the bogs or hiding in the sedges, he stood, as usual, holding the lamp so that I might read by its aid, and peering into my face, humming, perhaps, some patriotic song, the choice depending on his feelings at the time. For his mood changed as the weathercock veers on the church tower, vicious or indifferent, violent or serene, just as fancy took him.

When the missive was thrust into my bosom for safekeeping he would wait for me to get back to bed again, blow out the lamp, fling himself into the corner of the room, and go off to sleep.

One morning, after he had brought me a delightful letter, he rose early, and passed out of the chamber while I slept. How long he was away I do not know, but I was awakened by the noisy opening and closing of the door. Starting up from my sleep, so rudely broken in

upon, I thrust my hand under the pillow to feel for the dagger which was always handy.

"Master Blomberg," came the well-known voice, and in a tone that betokened the wildest excitement. "Master Blomberg, awake!"

"I am wide-awake, Peter," I answered, loosening my grasp upon the dagger, and supporting myself on my elbow. "What is wrong?"

"I saw him! I saw him! He is here, in the house! Alas! poor prince, that accursed ban will have its way! O God!"

The moon shone into the room, and the light fell on his beautiful face. I saw that it was working with emotion, while the poor, thin hands were clasping and unclasping continually.

"Saw whom?" I cried, a dread of something fearful coming upon me, and with the question I leaped out of bed.

"Francis Guion!"

"What!" was my cry, as, astounded and full of alarm, I began to dress in haste. "Tell me all, Peter."

"I awoke an hour ago, master, and felt sure that something was wrong," came the eager answer. "Then I rose quietly, and walked in my stockinged feet, peering in at every recess, into every empty room, into the hall, stealing past the sentry at the prince's door and back again, for the soldier bade me go to bed, and not be prowling round at such an hour. But a voice was whispering to me of danger, and I could not come back here until I knew what danger was afoot. I was turning into the corridor below this when I saw some one pass me. A lamp was near, and its light fell on the face of Guion.

"'You fiend!' I exclaimed, not able to be silent, and jumping out upon him. He started back at my sudden onslaught, but raising his fist, struck out at me. How it happened I do not know. I suppose I tried to avoid the blow and fell, but when I got on my feet again he was gone."

By this time Peter was in tears, and hiding his face

in his hands as he stood, he rocked himself to and fro, as one would do in all the frenzy of grief.

"They will kill the prince! They will kill him! Oh, would that I had caught Guion by the throat! Coward that I was to avoid a blow when the prince was in danger!"

"Never mind, Peter," said I, trying to soothe him. "We will go and search for him, even as you did just now."

That stayed his grief at once, and he was alert and eager. Heedless of possible danger from any sudden dagger thrust, he went to and fro with stealthy tread, drawing back every curtain, stepping into every recess, trying every door, going into such rooms as remained unfastened, down into the hall where men were on duty, questioning them as to whether they had seen Guion or any other suspicious-looking person, only to receive a negative reply, back again, up the grand staircase, down the corridor where the sentry kept guard outside the prince's sleeping chamber, getting the same answer at every point, that none had passed that night save Peter himself. We went through the whole of the mansion, not leaving a corner unsearched, aided by two or three who looked serious when Peter told of what he had seen.

It was a vain search, and when we came again to the head of the staircase, and the men tramped down to warm themselves before the blazing fire, one of them turned round, with a good-natured smile upon his face.

"You must have been dreaming, Peter."

The remark seemed to sting him.

"I dreaming? Nay, but I saw him, and felt him, and heard him, too, when he half cried out with fear as I leaped upon him unexpectedly. So how could I be dreaming?" was the angry response.

"There was no sign of anyone about, Peter, so you must have been dreaming," was the man's reply, as he laughingly tramped down the stairs and stalked across the hall.

"Master Blomberg," said Peter piteously, laying a

trembling hand on my arm, "do you believe that I was dreaming?"

"No," I answered, for I had never found him wrong in anything he told me yet. And seeing that he was hurt at the man's good-tempered words, I put my arm about his shoulder, and walked back to my room with him, telling him as we went that the man had only said it for fun, and meant nothing.

"I saw him!" was the emphatic assertion, while, half weeping with vexation, he lay down in his old corner, and sought once more to go to sleep.

As for myself, I was greatly disturbed—too much so to attempt to sleep, so that I lay and thought until it was time to rise and go about my daily task.

CHAPTER XIV

"THE FIRST FRUITS OF THE BAN"

PETER had recovered his spirits by the time his breakfast had ended, and although the day was gloomy enough, and the houses of the city were hidden by the dense fog which shut them in as effectually as a wall, he was as gay as though the sun was out and flooding the land with light and warmth. He stood in the hall among the men at arms, laughing and chatting, or telling of what he had seen while on his way from Leyden, and presently leaped upon a table near the roaring fire, while the men gathered round.

"What shall I sing?" said he, the firelight dancing in his eyes, and his whole body brisk and full of life. One found it hard to believe that he had so lately plodded through the moeres and polders, and thrust his way amid the sedges, as he cut off the corners of the tedious road in his endeavour to discharge his mission at Antwerp without delay. Knowing that I did not like him to appear with mud stains and unwashed face, he had groomed himself, as he expressed it, fit enough to appear before the princess.

"What shall I sing?" he cried, dancing gleefully about the table, careless of the shouts of the master of the kitchen, who did not wish to see the heavy boots stamping on boards which the serving men had scrubbed white with infinite labour.

"Let us hear the Ghent Paternoster," called out a burly man at arms, who had just come in out of the fog, and was pushing his way to the fire for the sake of its welcome warmth.

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"Nay, I like it not," was Peter's response.

"But we do, Peter, so sing away," said the soldier.

"Nay, I like it not," came the quiet answer; and the face that had been beaming with laughter grew grave, and the hands that had been tossing about in reckless glee hung still at the simple one's sides. "Nay, my mother never liked me to sing it, and I would not have her look down from heaven and hear me. Let me sing something else."

"Then give us a Beggar's song," shouted some, touched by poor Peter's words, and by his thought for one for whom he had such reverential love.

"Ay! A Beggar's song!"

In a moment the grave face brightened with laughter again, and the sweet voice came while he sang the old song, which none ever grew tired of, although it was so oft-repeated :

"Beat the drum gaily, rub-a-dow, rub-a-dub;
Beat the drum gaily, rub-a-dub, rub-a-dow;
Beat the drum gaily, rub-a-dow, rub-a-dub;
Long live the Beggars! is the watchword now."

He was as happy as a king when one of the troopers, picking up a drum which stood close by, beat it in time to the wild rollicking strain of the half-witted singer; and although the song had ended, he returned to the first words again, and called on the soldier still to beat his drum and the men to sing.

The great hall rang with the hoarse strains of loud-throated men whose voices had grown husky in their campaigns on soddened fields; but patriotism has no nice ear for music, and thinks more of lusty energy and resolution to bring confusion to the oppressor. It is easy to put such a hope into song, and the song is sweet enough to the patriot when loyalty is its chief note.

I saw the prince cross the hall at the other end while the chorus was at its height, and, with a smile upon his face, he lingered a moment or two to hear it to the end.

"I'd like King Stork to hear that!" cried Peter, when

the chorus died away, and the men stood laughing boisterously.

"Hist! The prince will hear thee."

"And what if he does?" asked Peter, staring at the speaker in amazement.

"Well, he will not like it."

"Will he not? Then I will not call the duke by that name in the prince's house again, but nevertheless he is King Stork to me, to you, to all of us, for everybody calls him such."

The prince passed on, and Peter sang another song, and yet another, until duty called his hearers elsewhere.

That day was the Duke of Anjou's birthday. Bells rang in every church tower, the ships in the harbour—at the prince's special request—did honour to the sovereign by flying flags from every mast, and cannon thundered from the walls, and forts, and citadel. But I noticed, when I walked along the narrow winding streets, from which the fog was lifting, and passed the halls of the ancient trade guilds, that no flags were floating, and that the festive look was altogether absent from the faces of the people whom I met.

Had it been the prince's natal day there would have been jubilation everywhere—flags, smiles, feastings, displays in dress and procession, a cessation from business, and many a fervent expression of affection. But at the doors of various houses people stood with dissatisfied faces, talking to their neighbours. Who was Anjou, that men should express love for him? asked one and another. The Netherlanders are hard to be moved by passion, and slow to come to a resolution; but when they have once determined they are not easily turned from their purpose. And this was the case with regard to the prince and the duke. They loved the former, but a stern, strong prejudice had sprung up in their hearts concerning the new sovereign who had been thrust upon them, and nothing less than the prince's direct command would have caused them to display any outward show of congratulation.

On my return to the prince's dwelling a busy scene

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presented itself. Men passed in and out, loitering now and again to say a word, and going on once more when some one called for the way to be cleared. French gentlemen who had come to Antwerp in attendance on the duke, and waited for their lords who were dining with the prince, were there, but audibly grumbling at the execrable weather; while Flemish gentlemen of all ranks—burgomasters, councillors, merchants, and here and there a sea captain whose garb and pewter medal betokened him a Beggar—loitered about on the staircase and in the corridors.

Peter Straalen was among them, speaking with some energy in the midst of a little group on the top of the stairs, but when I passed by he called to me to ask how I fared. Having no particular business on hand, I lingered, and joined in the conversation, in the course of which comments were passed on those who came and went. Most of them we knew, but strangers were present who doubtless had good reason for being there.

"I do not like this open house, such as the prince allows," said Straalen presently. "It serves, to my mind, to place his Highness in jeopardy, especially since the ban is yet talked about by the Spaniards." While he spoke he pointed to a dark-faced young man, clothed in the garb of a dyker. "Look at yonder fellow. What business has such as he here? Yet the prince wills it so, that any of the people should have access to him."

Our eyes turned to the spot where the young man was standing, and one could not but feel that it was a pity that people of his stamp could come and go at his pleasure in the prince's house. He was leaning carelessly against one of the pillars which supported a handsome archway, holding in his hand a roll of paper which he occasionally opened and scanned with apparent concern. He was below the middle height, and what with his mean dress, splotched here and there with the mud in which a dyker often worked, and which he had but indifferently sought to brush away, he was not such as one would expect to find among those who had come to do business with the Prince of Orange. There was an un-



couthness, too, about him, and his round and heavy face betokened that he belonged to the lower orders of the people.

Once one of the halberdiers who paced the floor of the hall halted and spoke to him, as if to know his business. His reply was curt—it was easy to see that by his look, while he pointed to the roll of paper, as if it were sufficient warrant for his presence and his stay at a spot where he could speak to the prince as soon as he appeared.

"Some day mischief will come of allowing such free access as that man has," said one in our group. "I will go to the fellow and tell him that his proper place is in the street."

When he spoke to the stranger the only answer was such as the halberdier had received—the somewhat snarling statement that he was within his rights, and meant to wait until the prince came from his room.

"Will not this fellow be better in the street, my man?" asked Straalen of the soldier, who, in his walk to and fro, was passing by.

"He would be better there a hundred times over, Master Straalen," the other responded, "but I dare not turn him into it lest the prince should be angry. His Highness is far too careless and trustful, and suffers all who will to wait and speak with him."

So saying, the man resumed his tramp, after another look which showed his disapproval.

When we turned away the dyker moved along the tapestry-lined passage, nearer to the door whence the prince would come. He was at dinner just then with Bonnivet, Des Pruneaux, and other Frenchmen of quality, but would presently come forth to go to the Palace of Saint Michael.

A few minutes later I was in my room dressing, since it would be my duty, with many others of his gentlemen in waiting, to accompany my master. I was buttoning my doublet when the sound of a pistol shot came with startling distinctness down the long corridor, and then an uproar in which shouts of execration, and curses, and

fearful screams were mingled. Hurrying out of the room and down the passage, I came upon a scene which filled me with horror. Des Pruneaux and Count Laval were standing with drawn rapiers, which I could see by the light which fell upon the blades were wet with blood. At their feet lay a man, whose face I could not see, and whose screams had now died away before the repeated thrusts of the weapons of three or four swearing halberdiers.

But my horror grew when I forced my way into the midst of a group of gentlemen, and saw the prince prostrate on the floor, supported by the faithful Straalen, on whose shoulder the bleeding head of his master lay. The miscreant had shot the prince while he put out his hand to take the petition which had been offered, and now he lay hovering between life and death—there being no sign of life save for his moving lips.

"What says he, Straalen?" cried one, for the tumult was so great that we could not hear whether the prince spoke or not.

The old sea captain looked up quickly, his rugged face full of emotion, and his eyes sparkling with tears.

"He says what I could never say, gentlemen—what I have not the grace to say: 'Do not kill him; I forgive him my death!' Nay, your Highness," he exclaimed, in the silence which now fell upon us all, "I have not enough religion in me to say such a thing as that for so foul a murderer."

"Say not so, Straalen," said the prince, halting between the words by reason of his pain, "but 'tis the will of God. My day is done, and I would not die with an angry word upon my lips."

He said no more, for darkness settled in upon him and he lay still.

"He is dead!" was the cry of those who stood around. Strong men, some of whom had been bound upon the rack, or had faced the foe on stricken fields and had never flinched, now stood about their master, broken by their sorrow, and not ashamed of tears that testified their boundless love for him who had surrendered everything

for the service of his country. More than one turned away from the sight, and seeing the murderer lying near, drew out their swords and, in helpless misery, drove the weapons into the body of the dead assassin, as if to find some relief by the futile act.

By this time the tumult had died away again, and, heedless of everything, servants, soldiers, gentlemen, and others thronged around on tiptoe, as if they feared that any sound would hurt their unconscious master.

"Does he breathe, Straalen?" cried the captain of the city guard, who was on the outside of the crowd, and strove to gain a view of the prince between the heads of the bystanders. "I would go out and tell the people that he lives, else there will be murder done when they hear of what has happened, and perhaps massacre."

Straalen put his ear to the prince's lips.

"Yes, Petit, he breathes. Ay, and he is coming to, thank God!"

"Then I will away, and stay the chance of tumult," said Lion Petit, turning and striding down the stairs and across the hall with sturdy step and kindly purpose. "'Tis for the prince's sake," I heard him mutter, while I followed close behind. "Would to God the prince may live, for 'twould be a sad day for us all if this should prove to be the day of his death."

The captain of the city guard—a man whom none had ever known to display emotion, hard at heart, heavy of disposition, almost callous, cruel, so some said—brushed his sleeve across his eyes, and stumbled on as though he could not see.

"'Tis the first fruits of the ban!" he cried at last in strident tones, halting on his way, and beating with his fist, helplessly and hopelessly, upon the iron-studded door. "But I swear that if he dies I'll plunge my sword into the first Spaniard I meet! Ay, and if that accursed duke is in the plot, he, too, shall die!"

So saying, he went into the street, in which the people had already begun to gather. As ill news ever does, so that story had fled through the city, gathering fresh horror as it ran, filling men's minds with anger and agony—

the one to call for vengeance on the Spaniard and on the duke, whom rumour associated with the crime, the other to make them weep in impotent sorrow.

My first thought was that the would-be murderer was Francis Guion, and when I turned back from following Petit and went toward my room it was a disappointment to scrutinize the dead man's face and find it to be that of the dyker who had been awaiting the prince's coming. It would have been a relief to know that he who most persistently dogged the Prince of Orange was now removed, and could do him no more harm if he lived after this determined attempt.

I was still gazing on the body when some one touched my hand, and looking round I saw the pale face of Peter. He was weeping silently, the tears falling down his cheeks, and his whole frame quivering. I should have thought that the sight would have frenzied him, but he held my hand in his and stood close up to me, as a child might have done.

"Poor prince," he murmured. "Master Blomberg, when I heard the shot, and then that awful cry as the swords of the French gentlemen ran into that miscreant's body, I thought of Guion. But it was not he. See! 'tis another. Alas! poor prince."

Then a fit of madness seized him, and a look of horror came into his eyes. Dropping my hand hastily, he snatched at my belt, drew forth the dagger which was there, and falling on his knees and clutching the dead man by the throat, he plunged the weapon into the still body again and again, crying while he did so:

"Foul murderer! You have slain our prince!"

A sudden thought came to his mind. Kneeling where he was, he looked up into my face and held out the dagger to me. The wild look which had startled me was gone, and the dark eyes were soft again and full of tears.

"Master Blomberg, my mother is in heaven, and the good prince is with her." And burying his face in his hands, he wept again.

I watched the poor creature for a while, my own heart full as sad as his, and my eyes dim, so that I only saw

the blurred body of Peter Bakkerzeel as it rocked to and fro.

"Come with me, Peter," said I presently. "Come and let us talk about it all in the quietness."

"Ay, let us talk about it in the quietness," said he, rising to his feet and taking my hand, while we walked to my sleeping chamber. We talked before the fire, which cast a ruddy glow into every corner of the room, and after a time he not only grew quieter but fell asleep. Rising quietly, I left the room to hear what could be learned.

But when I came back four hours later Peter was gone.

CHAPTER XV

THE CRY IN THE PASSAGE

WHILE the prince lay between two worlds I grew more and more anxious about my own concerns. I was full of wonder as to what had become of Peter, for, whereas his disappearance was quite in keeping with his usual methods of coming and going, his prolonged absence disturbed me greatly. Throughout the whole period of Caroline's stay in Leyden with my sister he had never been away for a greater time than a week or ten days. Now more than twice that interval had elapsed, and none had seen nor heard of his having been in Antwerp. A hundred times in a day I wondered how Caroline was faring, until the lack of news began to be intolerable.

I must have shown how much I was disturbed, for one day the princess, into whose presence I had been summoned, looked into my face keenly.

"You are ill, Master Blomberg?" said she inquiringly; but I shook my head and answered "No."

She herself, worn out with constant watching, to say nothing of her anxiety concerning the issue of this crime, was not too self-absorbed to note that I was either over-anxious or ill, and since I had assured her that I was well, she looked at me once more.

"Then what ails you? Bad news from home?"

"The lack of any news at all, your Highness."

After that I told her all. She was more than kind when the story was ended, and said many things to encourage me, when, God knows, she stood in need of encouragement herself.

"You shall bear a message from me to-morrow for

Van der Werf," said she presently, "and do not return until you know that all is well. I can understand your anxiety, Master Blomberg, for of late I, too, have known the bitterness of waiting, and getting, until to-day, but little hope in spite of it."

She would have said more, I think, but there was that in her eyes, and something in her voice, which made her silent, lest she should betray too much emotion.

We were up and away at daybreak—Meerman and I. And what a glorious morning it was! More glorious, perhaps, in contrast with the days which had followed in long succession since the attempt had been made upon the prince's life. These had been dull and gloomy, harbour, city, and the country round for miles all shrouded in fog and mist, as if Nature mourned the shameful endeavour to rob the world of one of its noblest sons. But now, for once in a way, the sun was shining brilliantly, without any show of mist to mar the brightness. A breath of warm air, also, came across the land.

"'Tis a happy omen, master," cried Meerman, shaking his horse's reins when we rode through the gateway of the city, and came out on the open country. "It runs well with what I heard Lion Petit say this morning—that the prince will not die, and that the leech has pronounced him out of danger."

"Thank God for that," I exclaimed, shaking Laurens's rein, and scampering across the grassy swards which were beginning to look green and beautiful again, now that spring had come.

As we got amid the lines of pollard willows which skirted the roads, or galloped beneath the great elms and chestnuts, we could hear the birds in full song. Now and again a stork flew overhead clumsily, and ravens went careering by, and quails, and hosts of smaller birds that gloried in the long-absent sunshine which had come back again. Here and there in the river a heron stood upon a sand bank, pluming himself, and arching his long, graceful neck while he warmed himself in the sun. On the trees around the first colours of spring were beginning to show, and the buds were almost ready to burst from their

winter shields. Down on the edges of the canals and backwaters and streams, companying with the reeds and sedges, through which the breeze was moving and making music, were the marsh marigolds. Here and there could be spotted a pure white primrose peerless,* which did not mind the fog, but now was glad to drink in the sunshine while it had the chance. Fresh reeds were pushing out of the marshy ground, to lend their pleasant bit of colour to the scene. It was delightful to me, now that I was on the move, no longer cooped up in a palace, to brood, and fear, and wonder, and add on to the misery which uncertainty brings.

Yes, it was a happy omen, as Meerman had said; and full of hope, we scampered across the polders, past windmills and farmhouses, through hamlets where the people called out to know how the prince fared, out on roads again, which were sometimes long sheets of standing water, after the heavy rains. At times we had to take a slower pace, for the soddened moeres made it hard work for the horses; but since the sun was shining, we did not mind. Now and again, too, we pulled up to have a chat at a wayside house, or to talk with the drivers of the long strings of pack horses that were taking food to the towns. They seemed to know, by the badges we wore, that we were in the service of the prince, and were eager to hear whether he was growing well again. At every such halt we inquired if any had seen aught of Peter Bakkerzeel, but we heard no news, so that we pressed forward, thinking that he must be ill in Leyden, and under my sister's care.

The day wore on, and the early sunset found us far away from Leyden, so that we looked about for a place in which to sleep. We espied one just as the night fell on us—a wayside inn, with a solitary lantern in the passage.

Dismounting, we called for some one to take our horses, and after long waiting, the landlord—a man of middle height and of sluggish mien—came out of the kitchen

* The old name for the poet's narcissus.

and asked us what our business was. I thought he looked at us surlily, as if he would rather have our room than our company, although, I wot, he would be willing enough when pay time came to have our money.

"We want stable and beds."

"Beds?" said he, in the same heavy way when we had told him. "There's only one room, just over the kitchen." Then looking me up and down, and standing with his arms akimbo, he reflected a while.

"'Tis a poor room for such as you, master. Had you not better go farther?"

"What matter about the room?" said I. "If the horses can get a good feed——"

"Which they can," he interrupted.

"Then we care not so much for ourselves, if you will but feed us well."

"Which I can," he answered laconically.

"Then, Meerman, see to the horses, and I will look at this room which mine host can place at our disposal."

Meerman was off at once, for the comfort of his horse was as much on his mind, at every time, as his own, and I, left with the landlord, followed his lead when he bade me follow him. Perhaps the man's silence was an advantage, but as for the house, the one drawback was the want of light. There was nothing in the passage but the solitary lantern I have already spoken of. The kitchen had one candle on the table, the only other light there being the dull red glow coming from the turf fire on the hearth. The stairs were dark, and as the landlord went on in front with a candle I stumbled continually while ascending the winding stairs or walking along passages, where we came on unexpected steps, down some of which I once fell sprawling. The noise of a great fellow like myself tumbling heavily was no small one, but it in no way disturbed the silent innkeeper, who merely looked round while I picked myself up. Seeing that I was ready, he went on without a word.

"You keep a dark house," said I, rubbing my bruised arm somewhat ruefully, for the blow it got in my fall was not a small one.

"Yes," was the only reply.

"But surely in such a wandering house, with so many twists and turns in it, it were profitable to have plenty of light. It would bring your hostelry into greater esteem, and travellers would be more likely to frequent the place. You remind me, landlord, of what an old sailor used to say—that many a man spoiled a good ship for want of a ryksdaaler's worth of tar."

I had never come across a man so sparing of his words, and knew not whether he was silent because he was surly by nature, or whether he was so of set purpose. All that he vouchsafed by way of reply was that he was poor, and could not afford it.

"And yet your house is full, since you lodge us here," said I, stepping into a loft, on the floor of which lay a couple of straw mattresses. As for furniture, there was none, save a chair, but every corner of the room was scrupulously clean, like everything else I had seen while passing through the house. I took small notice of this, however, for I was listening to the man's reply.

"I have no visitors in, but the other rooms are all upset." So saying, he placed the candlestick on the chair, and bidding me come down to supper when I pleased, turned and walked away.

Having nothing particular to do, and not being specially anxious for this fellow's company, I turned to the window and looked around idly on the outside world. It was dark when we entered, but now, away in the distance, behind some pollard willows, I could see the first signs of the rising of the moon, and leaning with my elbows on the little window sill, I stood there thinking.

Some six feet below me was the roof of an outhouse, offering easy access to the room from the outside. Below that again was a yard in which lay all sorts of lumber, nothing showing particularly in that half-darkness—between black night and moonshine. A high wall formed its boundary, and beyond that lay a flat sweep of polderland, still and silent—lifeless, so far as I could see. But between me and this were some iron window bars, apparently making a prison of the room assigned to me, and

this, in view of the landlord's surliness, I did not altogether like.

Besides one's thoughts there was not much to engage attention, but for a long time I stood there, carelessly, until, feeling hungry, I decided to find my way to the kitchen. Taking the candle in hand, I crossed to the door, and opening it, tramped down the passage, looking well to see where I went. Unexpectedly the wind swept past me, the light flickered, struggled hard to keep burning, steadied itself for a moment when I raised my hand to form a shield, and then went out, leaving me in darkness.

There was nothing at hand with which to get a light, and no alternative was left but to grope along as carefully as possible, hands outstretched to keep me apprised of any bend in the passage, and my feet moving on cautiously, feeling about for such steps as might be in the way. Presently I found myself at a step. I mounted, to find another, and yet a further one; so up and up for a dozen or thereabouts. But this was wrong, for I had not at any time when the landlord was my guide gone down more than three or four. I had lost my way, which was not to be surprised at in a strange inn, and with no light to help me.

I was about to turn and make an attempt to find another way to the kitchen, when my eye caught a streak of light a few yards ahead. Some one must be there of whom I could ask guidance, and I moved forward quickly. But unexpectedly there came a sound which startled me; a low wail, as of some one in pain, and then a long hush. I could not tell whence it came, and stood, therefore, perfectly still, wondering what the sound could mean. But that low wail of pain did not startle me so much as the voice which presently broke the silence.

"Tell me where she is in hiding, and you shall go free."

It was the voice of the Duke of Anjou, so plainly his that I could have sworn to it out of a hundred, and it came from the room under the door of which the light was shining.

No answer came to his words, but a few moments later there was a scream of agony, and then this in tones I knew so well:

"I will not tell! I promised her, and I will not tell!"

Without waiting to consider consequences, but drawing my sword in case there might be danger, I hurried forward, full of wonder as to what was being done to poor Peter Bakkerzeel, whose voice, now at its loudest, repeated the words:

"I will not tell! I promised her, and I——"

The voice hushed suddenly, as if some one had clapped a hand upon the speaker's mouth. Reaching the door, I felt about for the latch, but when I tried it and sought to thrust the door open, I found it bolted.

"Open this door!" I cried, but getting no answer, I beat upon it with the handle of my sword. And still the voice went on piteously, rising again until it came to my ears piercingly:

"I will not tell! I promised her, and I will not tell!"

When he ceased I listened, my face close to the wooden barrier, as if to hear what they were doing inside. There was nothing but the sharp clinking of a chain and the low sob and wail of pain, like that which I had heard before.

CHAPTER XVI

AT THE ZOMERZORG

CARELESS as to whether I should confront the duke or not, and furious at the thought that the simple-souled creature was being ill-treated, I stood back a while to gather up strength, then hurled myself against the door with all my weight. It yielded a little, and the crash was followed by a cry of wonder, as if Peter, intent on the attempt to wrest a secret from him, had not heard my voice, but now was looking to the door, the thought of possible deliverance dawning upon him.

"Peter!" I cried, in a tone I was wont to use, and which he knew at once.

There was a sudden rattle of chains, as of some one jumping to his feet; and then the old voice, with wonder and gladness in its tone:

"Oh, dear master! I have not told them anything!"

Even in his peril his thought of secrecy and a faithful promise came to the poor fellow before all other things.

One more bound against the door burst it in sufficiently for me to crawl through the hanging, broken wood, but what I saw in my first glance enraged me. Peter was there, in the far corner, with eyes that stared eagerly in my direction, and his thin hands clasped together and pressed to his bosom. The clothes he wore were nearly torn from his body. His hair, in which of late he had taken so much pride, because Caroline had asked him to tend it, was all dishevelled. He stood half doubled against the wall, to which he was fastened by chains, which were attached to his hands and feet, the bonds being such that he could not stand erect. On the floor lay a

heavy pair of smoking pincers, burning their way into the woodwork. A red gash on Peter's left arm showed what his tormentors had been doing.

When I had struggled through the gap and crossed the room, to my astonishment he was alone; but he gave me little time to think of this, for he stretched out his hands, and clasping mine in his, kissed them again and again, murmuring:

"Thank God! thank God! but I did not tell them!"

"Where have they gone?" I exclaimed.

"They went through yonder wall—King Stork and two others whom I do not know by name. They tore my arm with yonder pincers which they heated in the fire, and sought to make me tell them where she was."

I gazed at the wall, but from where I stood saw nothing like an exit; yet when I stepped forward it was easy to see the door, which, being coloured like the walls, could not be judged a door from the spot where Peter was chained. Opening it, I saw a staircase lit up by lamps at intervals, and at the foot of it another door.

Hurrying down the steps, which were of stone, I thrust the door open, and found that it led into a kind of lumber room, across which a way was cleared to another exit which opened into the stable yard, into which I went savagely. But I was too late to overtake those who had been torturing their prisoner. At the moment when I stepped into the open air there was a clatter of horses' feet upon the stones, and three horsemen, showing out plainly against the moonlight, which still shone almost level across the land, were riding through the gate.

Just then I heard a movement, and looking round quickly, saw two men. Going in their direction, but alert against surprise, I found that one was Meerman, who gazed with a sort of wondering interest after the riders. There was nothing to arouse his suspicion, so that he simply stood at the stable door, out of which he had been coming, to watch the horsemen mount with haste and ride away. Beyond him, at another door, but showing up plainly because the moon was searching out the yard at that spot, stood Calberg, the landlord, who, when

he saw me approaching, endeavoured to avoid me by going into the stable, where only a solitary lantern was alight. His hand was on the door, in the act of thrusting it in my face, when I bounded forward, and being more active than he, I pushed my way in, caught him by the collar, and held him fast, strong-looking fellow though he was. Meerman, seeing me do this, was at my elbow in an instant, and the man, who had thought to resist, seeing two stalwart men before him, and both well-armed, stood sullen and silent, as if awaiting the turn of events.

"Take your hand off my throat," he exclaimed, "and tell me what you want of me. Is this how you assault a landlord in his own hostelry? Do you mean robbery? For if so, you will find naught here."

I had suffered him to say all this while I still had my hand on him, and in the meantime Meerman, puzzled to know what was afoot, stood by, ready to take part with me if there should be any necessity. I do not suppose that the fellow was a coward in any sense, but, taken unawares, Calberg was somewhat cowed, and in a manner helpless. Meerman was such a giant by his side that in a tussle with him alone there would be no chance of getting away. Consequently he submitted to the inevitable, and simply asked me again to take my hand from his collar.

"You shall come with us first and explain something," said I, compelling him, *nolens volens*, to go with me across the yard and up the stairs to the place which had been converted into a prison chamber.

When Meerman saw Peter crouching in the far corner and chained there, he swore a good round oath, and caught the landlord by the throat, shaking him as a dog would a rat; then—since I had drawn my own hand away, thinking a bit of rough treatment would do the fellow no harm—he flung Calberg from him headlong to the floor, where he lay too frightened to move.

"Get up and give me the key to unlock those chains!" I cried, my indignation knowing no bounds by reason of this wanton outrage.

"I have no key," said he, slowly getting to his feet.

"No key? Then you must needs find one, else you do not go from this room. Meerman, thrust yonder pincers into the fire, and he shall know what poor Peter's sufferings have been. By the time they are hot he will freshen up his memory."

The landlord stood watching Meerman as he tramped across the floor and took up the instrument of torture. The stern look on my serving man's face plainly showed Calberg that he would get little mercy if he held out, or did not do something speedily toward setting the prisoner free; so that when Meerman turned round and gazed at him, with his back to the fire, looking complacent, as though an agreeable task was in store, the landlord slipped a hand into his pocket and drew out a number of keys, one of which he selected and gave to me. In a short time the chains fell from Peter's hands and feet, and he stood up to shake himself, as if to be assured that he was truly at liberty once more. Then he turned to Calberg, and staring at him for a time, as if to call back something to his memory, stooped suddenly, and picking up a stool, hurled it with all his force at the landlord. The man barely escaped a broken head by ducking quickly, and the stool, dashing against the wall beyond, fell broken to the floor.

"I wish it had struck his pate," cried Peter regretfully, going across the room to pick up the pieces which lay scattered about. When he had done this, he turned to me and asked for food.

"Art hungry?" said Meerman.

"Yes. 'Tis four days since I had any food, although yonder brute has brought some to me daily, placing it in sight, but out of reach, and carrying it away again before darkness came."

This was torture indeed to a hungry creature, and Meerman bestowed a kick on Calberg by way of payment for what he had done.

"Now, Calberg," said I, bidding my serving man take the landlord by the collar and hold him firmly, "you shall come with us and show us where your larder is, so point the way."

He was tractable enough now, and told us all we desired to know in the matter of getting food, so that before long we were seated in the kitchen with the board spread with the best which the inn contained, and the door bolted, so that Calberg should not give us the slip.

Peter sat and eat ravenously, and meanwhile we watched him carve huge slices of beef, then spoil a capon and a green goose, devour mangcorn bread, and drink draughts of beer which amazed Meerman and myself, while Calberg looked on woefully, knowing that a meal was being eaten for which he was likely to get scant payment.

"Thou hast had more than enough," said Meerman, remonstratingly, when Peter wrenched off a drumstick with his fingers, and placed it in his platter. "Thou wilt gormandize until thou wilt want to sleep a whole week."

"Yes," said I, chiming in, "and we want to know your story, Peter."

"My story?" he rejoined, looking first at Meerman and then at me, but casting his eyes on the capon's limb the next moment somewhat regretfully. "But this small bit will not hurt me, will it? Fancy, I have tasted naught for four whole days and nights, although I hungered in sight of food."

When I shook my head, and Meerman gave him no encouragement, he took up the drumstick and tossed it back into the dish, making a wry face while he did so. Then, looking round the room in a casual way, he caught sight of Calberg.

"You scoundrel!" he cried, shaking his fist at him. "Thou too shalt starve, and I will be the jailer. Thou shalt feed occasionally on a cup of water, and have such a sight of capons, and roasted meat, and jugs of beer, which I will draw once in every hour, so that thou shalt see it foaming—ay, and it shall be all ranged within three inches of the limits of the chains. Ha! to think of it! Hungry in the presence of roasted meat! hungry with such as this, and meat pasties before thee"—and he pointed to the table, which still had a goodly show of dainties on it—"near enough to be able to catch the

savour of it all, but just too far to touch, much less to taste! 'Tis better torture, that, I think—kinder, yet more tantalizing—than the hot pincers, for they burn for a few minutes, whereas thou wilt grow hungrier every hour, and feel faint, and have all that gnawing pain which belongs to famine. How wilt thou like it, Calberg? And listen! I'll wait on thee. I'll give thee a drumstick, so! just near enough for thy lips to touch. Ay, thou shalt even nibble it"—his eyes were screwed up with fun at the thought, and his face was all smiles—"just one quarter of an inch, and the taste will make thee long the more. I'll wake up at night and wait upon thee! Ha! fine times we'll have—thou the prisoner this time, I the jailer. Thou to look on, and I to eat and drink!"

The anticipation of this punishment gave him such keen pleasure that he laughed until the tears rolled down his cheeks, and his sides so ached that he held them with his hands, and still went on with laughter. Then, with the drumstick in his hand, he danced about the kitchen floor and sang, until from sheer weariness he flung himself into the settle before the fire, silent, but rubbing his hands with glee.

It was a difficult task to get the story from him, for his thoughts were all on this scheme of his, of tormenting the landlord. But after a while he told us what had chanced to him after quitting Antwerp. He had gone back to Leyden without my usual messages to the dear ones, and being somewhat unnerved—so much we gathered—after what he had seen when the prince was shot, he asked Barbara to allow him to rest a little time, feeling unwilling to undertake the journey to Antwerp. He wiled away the hours as was his wont, singing in the streets and from the house tops, or telling to groups of enraged citizens what he knew of the attempt upon the life of Father William.

Then came some days of sickness, during which he lay in the house, tended kindly by Caroline, Barbara, and Aunt Materin, until it was all so delightful, he added, naïvely, that he shammed sickness, although he was well enough to be up and about the house.

One night, when he had grown well again, he was sauntering along the Breestraat, when two men accosted him, asking him if he knew where Caroline Hesselaer dwelt—whether in Leyden or elsewhere. At once his inbred cunning returned, and he bade them follow him, first bargaining for something by way of payment for his services as guide.

Keeping a yard or two in front of them, he led the way down the narrow, winding streets, across the bridges, down by the Rapenburg canal; then turning suddenly, he passed to the Burg, the round tower whence the people had watched the progress of the fleet during the late siege, the men meanwhile grumbling, and bidding him go direct to the spot they desired to reach.

"You asked me to show you where Mistress Caroline Hesselaer dwelt, did you not?" said Peter innocently, but, standing in the ill-lighted street, they did not see the fun that was lurking in his eyes.

"We did," growled one, quite out of temper; "but if you do not do so quickly, I'll throw you into the canal."

Peter laughed boisterously at the threat.

"Throw *me* into the canal? I can swim like a fish. But come along, or I'll show you no more."

"She does not dwell in the tower," remonstrated one of the men, as they halted, refusing to ascend, and making a snatch at Peter's cloak, which, however, proved futile, for he darted out of reach.

"Ha! then I bid you good night," cried he, running up the winding steps, quickening his pace when the men, swearing roundly, and throwing out all maner of threats as they advanced, followed him angrily.

When they reached the top they saw Peter crawling past a cannon, and just as they got to it he disappeared down the wall with a loud laugh, feet and hands busy in the broken stonework, which served to give him foothold. Reaching the grass below, and calling out farewell, he was lost to them in the darkness, and made his way to my sister.

At last he started on the road to Antwerp with messages from home; but coming to a lonely spot one after-

noon, and finding an old outhouse in the yard of a ruined farm, he lay down to rest a while. Lying there, busy with his thoughts at first, he fell asleep, awaking to find himself a prisoner, being bound hand and foot by the same two men whom he had left on the Burg.

It was of no avail to struggle. One gave him a kick, and threw him across a horse, holding him there while the other mounted into the saddle; then leaping on the second horse, he gave the word, and they went off at a gallop. He could not see the way by which they came, for the shaking and the pain from his bonds almost robbed him of consciousness. All that he knew when the ride came to an end was that he had been brought to a hostelry, which he thought by its appearance must be the Zomerzorg, which lay in a lonely spot among the polders, and was rarely visited by any travellers save the pack horsemen. Unable to resist, he kept silent, but watched intently, so that he might know where he was to be lodged, and possibly find some loophole for escape.

One of the riders, dismounting, lifted him from the saddle, and carried him across the stable yard to a doorway, through which he passed so roughly that poor Peter's head struck against the jamb with such force that he became senseless. When he returned to consciousness he found himself lying in a room bare of all furniture, the light coming in drearily through a barred window close to the ceiling. The first movement gave token of the fact that his hands were bound with fetters, then that his feet were chained as well. When he rose he could not stand upright, nor move away from the wall to which his chains were locked.

After that came days and nights of hunger and loneliness, save for the tantalizing visits of Calberg, when tempting food was brought, not to be eaten, but looked at, and then taken away again.

A couple of hours before I had burst in and found the prisoner, three men appeared—two of them his captors who had brought him to the Zomerzorg. But the third was none other than the Duke of Anjou, who was disguised at first, but by the merest accident stood re-

vealed to Peter, who knew him too well to fall into any error as to his identity. Not only so, his general bearing, the respect which the others showed him, his rich dress—all these were sufficient to indicate that this visitor was a man of rank. Peter knew his voice. He could have sworn to it among a hundred, for once his croaking speech was heard there was no mistaking it. Then his diminutive size, and what was almost deformity, to say nothing of his unwholesome face, which had made Elizabeth of England call him her "frog prince," since she did not wish to speak her full mind about his ugliness, and so give offence to the King of France—all that was noticed by Peter, who, sitting bolt upright in the settle when I suggested the bare doubt, exclaimed:

"I will swear that it was King Stork!" He said it so decisively that there was no room left for any question.

"Peter Bakkerzeel," said this visitor—the duke, as later events proved—"where does Mistress Caroline Hesselaer dwell now?"

"Why do you wish to know?" asked Peter; and aware that she was hiding from Anjou, and that she had left Antwerp with me secretly and disguised, he resolved that the handsomely clad duke, who, to Peter's eyes, was hideous, should get no news from him. He met the questions with a cunning which baffled one who was wont to be on level terms with his opponents. So resolutely was the duke resisted and his questions parried, and so unable was he to obtain information by threats, that at last he resorted to coercion—the sort of coercion which a tyrant by nature would inevitably fall back upon. He turned round and called for Calberg to come and light a fire without delay. The sight of the great pincers, which he had often heard the people speak about when the Inquisition and its tortures were uppermost in their minds, terrified him. Pain had always a terror for him, and when the cruel-looking instruments were thrust into the flames, he went on his knees and implored the duke not to torment him.

"Tell me where the lady is, and you shall go free. Ay,

and you shall have this purse of gold," said Anjou, holding a handsome bag before him.

"But what will you do with her?" cried the poor prisoner pitifully, struggling between loyalty to his promise and his dread of pain.

"I will treat her as a princess. She has promised to be my wife, but I have lost her."

"'Tis a lie!" said Peter bluntly. "She is to marry Master Blomberg, and would not look on such as you!"

The duke, enraged at the words, struck the poor creature across the mouth, and bade one of the men see whether the pincers were red.

But what need to tell the remainder of that story? Peter looked at his arm, whence the tormentors had torn the sleeve, and wept. The glee had gone when he had passed from telling how he had befooled the men; and according to the tenor of the tale so did he change—now wild with hate, now with a gleam of cunning in his eyes, his face and voice the reflex of what his feelings had been throughout. When he told how the tormentors, callous as the Inquisitors themselves, followed the behest of the duke in the endeavour to force a confession from him, he felt afresh the smart and agony, and wept and well-nigh screamed.

"But never mind, Peter," said I soothingly, putting my arm about him, and comforting him greatly by doing so, "we have this landlord to practise on, and since you are going to try your hand at tormenting him by starvation, it will make amends, and more, for all they made you suffer."

"Ha! and so it will! Hi! Calberg! how long since thou didst have a good meal? The longer since the better, for thou wilt grow hungry all the sooner, and I shall have the greater fun."

With these words he jumped to his feet, and ran from the settle into the middle of the kitchen. But when he got there he cried out in amazement. Meerman and I had listened so intently to the story Peter had to tell that we forgot the landlord completely. Now, when he was wanted, he was nowhere to be seen. He had quietly made

his way to the door, drawn the bolts softly, opened it, and slipped away. Peter fairly danced with rage, and darting through the doorway, ran out to the yard, searching high and low for the owner of the Zomerzorg, who could be nowhere found.

CHAPTER XVII

AT THE CORNER OF THE KLOGSTEEG

FEARING to trust Peter in the stable yard alone, Meerman and I followed quickly, and searched with him, keeping him well in view lest he might fall into mischief. But the search was altogether a vain one. Stable, cow house, hayloft, outhouse, malt house, wood garth—every corner we could see or think of—all were searched without a trace of Calberg's whereabouts. Our own two horses were in the stable, and a third, possibly the property of the landlord.

Returning to the kitchen, Meerman and I took council, while Peter, disconsolate, stirred up the peat on the hearth, and flung himself into the settle, where he sat and gazed moodily into vacancy.

"What say you, Meerman, as to the course we ought to take?"

"Go at once to Leyden, lest Calberg, finding the duke, may tell him his suspicions as to Caroline's whereabouts, based on what he heard while Peter told the story of his doings in the streets."

"But the horses——"

"Nay, master, they are not tired," interposed the serving man, anticipating what I had to say. "He"—pointing over his shoulder in the direction of Peter—"may know some short routes which will lessen the journey considerably, and now that the moon is out we shall get to Leyden by daybreak."

"The poor fellow could never keep going on foot after such a week," said I.

"Nay, sir, but he can ride. Peter, canst ride a horse?"

he called out, turning round to face the fire. He knew the other's skill as a horseman, but hoped by pretended forgetfulness to place him on his mettle, and cause him to forget his chagrin.

"I ride a horse?" cried the other, jumping to his feet. "Didn't I ride when we brought Mistress Caroline to Rotterdam? I can ride a horse as easily as I can climb a water pipe. But why?"

"Canst show us the short ways to Leyden?"

"Try me," the answer came; and Peter, alert, forgetful already of his disappointment for the time, and eager to know what was afoot, came across to where we were standing.

"Are there any short ways by which horses can travel?" I asked.

"Yes, Master Blomberg, and many a mile will be saved. Shall we start?"

"Yes, Peter. We want to get to Leyden, lest King Stork and the landlord should be there before us."

"What! Get there before us? They will find Mistress Caroline. Now, God forbid! Let us away at once."

Snatching a cap from a peg in the wall, he bounded out of the house and across to the stable, where, as he remembered, another horse besides our own was resting.

I have never known such an admixture of quick-wittedness, ingenuousness, and cunning as this poor creature displayed: one moment the man, with some resource and no small courage; then the child, fit to be tended by a mother, simple, innocent, and wayward, but at times with eyes which had the gleam of madness in them, causing one to think of his possible doings with a certain dread. Had he found Calberg or the duke, or either of those men who acted as agents for his grace, there might have been murder—all depended on the mood which possessed him at the moment. From what I had seen, and what I knew of his doglike affection for Caroline, I think the mood at this time would have been the murderous one.

Before many minutes had gone we were in the saddle, and galloping along the dikes which held in the waters of

the canals. Bending our heads at times to avoid the branches of the trees which lined the canal sides, we rode onward, now turning to cross the polder, descending into the hollow land where windmills were continually plying, in order to remove the waters which found their way into the fields after the heavy rains; then in single file through a quaking bog, where, by the moon's aid, we saw a beaten, winding path; now crossing a canal by a drawbridge which a peasant let down for us after being induced to quit his comfortable bed. Peter was invaluable to us at such spots, whenever the cottage was on the other side of the canal. He deftly crossed the slippery sluice, and hammered away at the door, giving the inmates no sleep, however much they grumbled, and insisting on their purchasing rest by one of their number coming down and suffering us to use the bridge.

Shortly after sunrise we rode across the undulating ground, and through the wooded country, and on emerging from this we saw Leyden, with her walls and church towers, looking very beautiful in the bright spring morning's sunshine. When Peter caught sight of the gray stones of the Borg he laughed boisterously, and drove his horse ahead of ours.

To get to the Klogsteeg our way lay across the open market place, where, to my great delight, I saw two well-known figures walking in the direction of home. Riding on with noisy clatter to overtake them, we came up just as they turned to see who was riding with such haste. There was a pleasant greeting instantly, and Caroline and Barbara had me by the hand as soon as I dismounted. I had thrown my reins to Peter, who still sat in his saddle, his face beaming, and since no one took any immediate notice of him he wiled his time away by singing snatches of such songs as came to his mind. Walking between the two maidens, and followed by Meerman and Peter, we went homeward leisurely, talking of so many things that we had no thought for any who might pass us. That was why I did not understand at first when Peter called out suddenly:

"See! the two men!"

Turning quickly, wondering what he meant, I saw a couple of fellows coming out of the Klogsteeg, apparently endeavouring to pass without attracting our notice. Peter's eyes, however, had been too sharp, and at the moment of my turning they were close to him, and he was pointing at them with his riding whip. Having no thought for consequences, he suddenly raised his hand, and brought down the whip with such stinging force upon the face of one of the men that a livid streak came across it instantly. The lash was followed up with lightning rapidity with a second. The man cried out by reason of the pain, and put up his hands to protect himself, swearing horribly. His companion half advanced to pull the assailant from his seat, and might have done so had I not stepped forward threateningly. For a moment he hesitated, as if he measured my strength, and finding that his comrade and he would be no match for Meerman and myself, he turned away with an oath, laying a hand on the other's arm, and drawing him off into a side alley. Peter slipped out of his saddle and wished to follow them, but I held him back, and told him he would come to harm again.

When we reached the house door I looked down the street, but neither of the men were in sight, and we went in unobserved, one of the workmen coming from the shop to take the tired horses to the stable.

Two days went by, and I saw nothing of the men whom we had met at the corner of the Klogsteeg, although each time I went into the streets I looked about in all directions, sometimes going down narrow alleys on the bare chance of finding them lurking round. Meerman, too, was none the less alert, but, like me, had seen nothing of them. Peter, after a hearty meal on our arrival, disappeared, and we saw nothing of him for those two days. That made me anxious, for so long as Anjou's men might be in Leyden there was danger lest the simple fellow should do something rash, and come to an untimely end.

The burgomaster, having heard my story as to what had happened in the Zomerzorg, bade the city watchmen

keep a sharp lookout for Peter's safety, and arrest any two men who might answer to the description I had given. More than once I was summoned to the stadthouse to see men who had been taken thither on suspicion, but they were not those of whom I had complained.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MEN IN THE KLOGSTEEG

On the night of the second day I sat looking out of the window of my bedchamber after the others had gone to bed. The window of the room where Francis Guion had always slept when he worked for me was left unfastened, so that if Peter should return at night he could find his way into the house. My aunt objected when I insisted on this, for, as she said, robbers had been known to enter people's houses by the roofs, and she had no care to have such prowling around while she was sleeping.

"But none would ever do so, aunt," I answered, lightly. "'Tis mere fancy. Who ever knew of such a thing in Leyden? Besides, how would Peter fare if he came at night and could not get in?"

"Let him get in by the street door. He has hands, and can knock."

"True, aunt; but the simple fellow would never do that if he could help it."

"Then let him stay out of doors," she responded with some asperity; but in the end she yielded to the arrangement, and the window remained unfastened for Peter on his return.

Sitting in the window, I looked down into the street where everyone who passed could be seen plainly, so brilliantly did the moon shed forth her light. It was almost like day. Now and again a watchman went by, but he had little to do where all the citizens were orderly. Others walked by who had spent the evening with their friends, and were now going home, not fearing, as they had done in bygone years, the stealthy approach of the Familiars,

or the advance up the street of the Spanish horse that had been wont to parade the city from sunset to dawn.

Among those who passed was a man dressed like an artisan, but looking at him keenly—why, I know not—I thought that there was something familiar about him. I saw his face when he went by on the other side, for he looked up at the house, the moonlight falling full upon him. Another went by not long after. I did not see his face, but he overtook the first who had loitered a little way down the street; and presently they walked on in each other's company.

A score must have gone by during the next hour, but I thought no more about any of them, whereas these two men were on my mind all the time. Who were they? What did they want? Why did one of them look up at the house so curiously? Yet so might a dozen others have done, quite naturally, for our dwelling was singularly quaint and picturesque with its projecting windows and ornamental facings. But they went from my thoughts when I saw Peter coming along in the jaunty style he always assumed when in good spirits. He was singing, and the clear voice caused each word to be heard as it rang down the street. It was a song he had lately picked up from some one who had come over from England, and it suited his fancy to sing it sometimes as a change from the Flemish ballads.

For the time being he had forgotten the duke's brutality, and was on his way to the usual mounting place, whereby he got to the roofs, and so into the house. He went by without a pause, waving his knotted stick just as the wild fancy took him. His voice died away, and presently I lost sight of him.

Thinking to go up to greet him when he should return, I opened the door and left it ajar, so that I might hear him. Before long he was tramping about the floor of the room overhead; then his own door opened, and he came down the stairs, passing across the landing and down the other stairs which led to the lower portion of the house where the larder was. It was what he usually did, for nearly always he came back hungry. He was hum-

ming the same song, barely loud enough to be heard, so that no one should be disturbed, and a little later he was almost out of hearing.

Then I sprang to my feet, eager and full of wonder. What had happened? Peter's voice came clearly through the silent house:

"Who are you? Why are you here?"

The startled question, spoken in a tone which was full of fear, was followed by a piercing scream, the sound of a scuffle, a fall, and another cry. Before it ended I had snatched up my sword and was hurrying down the stairs. While I was doing so the street door banged.

Barely saving myself from falling over the prostrate body of Peter, I went forward, pulled open the door, ran into the street, and looked up and down. Almost out of sight were two men, running for dear life, heedless of the call of a watchman who fell on the stones as one of the fugitives ran into him, and after that I saw no more of them. It was useless to attempt to follow, so I turned into the house, bolted the door against any possible intruders, and went to where Peter lay, to see what mischief had befallen him. By the moonlight which came through one of the windows I saw him lying on the floor, senseless, moaning, and bleeding. My aunt, having heard the scream, was descending the stairs, half clad and startled, but bravely facing possible danger in her desire to know what that dreadful night cry meant. Before long she was on her knees by Peter's side, trying by the moonlight to see what had befallen the poor fellow.

"Has he had a fall, Bertrand?"

"No. I fear that he met two men on the stairs, and seeing them in the moonlight he raised the alarm. Then came a fall, and I ran out to see what was amiss. Two men were disappearing up the street when I ran to the door."

"What did I tell you about that window, Bertrand?" asked Aunt Materin severely. "They were robbers, you may be sure. I have not such faith as you in our fellow-townsmen. There are thieves here as there are all the world over."

Her talk did not hinder her endeavours to bind up the gaping wound on Peter's forehead, and before long she had stripped off some of her linen to serve as a bandage.

"Poor fellow," she said sympathetically, when she placed the cool linen in position. "His lot is hard enough, to be bereft of reason, and to be but a child when he might have been a beautiful man, and noble too; yet some scoundrel must needs add to his sorrows thus! Ha! come hither, Martha. Yes, and you girls also." For, looking up the stairs she espied the old nurse and my sister, who, with Caroline between them, were looking down in wonder and no small fear.

"'Tis aunt," cried Barbara, coming at once, and followed by the others, who had dressed hastily on hearing the alarming scream, but had been almost afraid to advance, not knowing what danger threatened. In a short time they were sent this way and that, and when Peter began to regain consciousness, I took him in my arms and carried him to the bed he usually slept on, the others following.

"Where are those two men?" he asked presently, and rising on his elbow.

"What two men were they?" said Barbara.

"The two whom I led to the Burg when they wanted Mistress Caroline; the same two who carried me to the Zomerzorg, and tormented me there; the same two we met at the corner of the Klogsteeg, where I slashed one of them across the face. It was he who beat me down just now. I had come home intending to tell you that I had found out where they lodged, and I climbed to the roof and got into the house. When I was coming down the stairs I saw, by the aid of the moonlight which streamed in through the window, two men standing, as if they wondered what they should do or where they should go. When I cried out they turned and sprang upon me. Mistress Caroline, they came hither for you. I heard one say in the street in the evening that the duke would have you, whatever came, and I was come home to say so."

"Well, go to sleep now, Peter," said I gently.

"But I can not stay here. They will come back and

kill me." He sat up, staring round with that old, wild, frightened look. "My mother will not come to take care of me to-night, and they will kill me."

"Then come into my room," said I, "and sleep there. I shall be at hand if you want me."

"Yes, I will come," he answered, getting from the bed. Turning to wish the others good night, we went to rest. Peter lay down in the corner, as he was wont to do in my room at Antwerp, and before long was sleeping soundly.

CHAPTER XIX

THE POISONED FLAGON

I DID not suffer Caroline to go out of my sight after that without being assured that she was in safe keeping. If I could not accompany her when she wished to walk the streets to do some shopping or to call upon some friends —for she had made several in a very brief space of time— either Meerman or one of the men from the shop went with her as escort, walking some distance behind, not to be intrusive.

The need for precaution incensed me, and since the duke and these creatures of his had no care for order, I swore that they should pay dearly at the first opportunity. The impulse came to write and tell the prince, but he was in such trouble that it had been inconsiderate and unkind to have worried him with my affairs. His brave-souled and loving princess had died not many days after he had gone to the cathedral to return thanks for his recovery. That was trouble enough, seeing how she had practically written out her death warrant by insisting on nursing him night and day, in spite of her own ill health. When the strain and anxiety had passed, and the prince was out of danger, she lay down wearily upon her bed to die.

Caroline and I were very happy during those spring and early summer months, in spite of the anxiety as to what might chance to separate us if the duke still persisted in his endeavours to carry her away. We took all manner of precautions. She and Barbara moved from their sleeping room, and came to one next to my own, so that in case of any attempt being made at night I should

hear it, and be ready to go to their rescue. Peter, too, insisted on lying across the doorway of their room at night, so that none could enter without his knowledge, especially since he was the lightest of sleepers.

So time went on until June was nearly out, when, one day, a messenger came from the prince desiring my presence and further service. There was no alternative but to go, whatever misgivings I might have concerning Caroline. This "King Stork," as Peter persisted in calling him, might yet be working in the dark, and who could say what might chance at his bidding in my absence?

Nothing happened out of the ordinary for some time after my return to Antwerp. The prince, although he bore the marks of that base attempt, and was yet in pain by reason of it, was able to see to state business. Occasionally he went through the streets of the city, receiving so many tokens of affection when he did so that more than once I saw the duke—who rode with him at times—scowl alike at the prince and the people. My master may have seen it, but I think he did not. If he did he suffered no sign of it to show upon his face.

Early in July we went to Bruges, so famous for the beauty of its women that I hoped the duke would see some there who would make him forget Caroline. So far he had done nothing for the Netherlanders but go from place to place, accepting homage, feasting, receiving new titles, giving in return all sorts of promises, and making so many protestations of affection for the people and their institutions, that men began to think that he protested too much to be sincere.

He was visiting Bruges to receive the greatest mark of distinction which had yet been bestowed upon him—the title of Count of Flanders; not an empty one, by any means, but one which brought with it large revenues, much honour, and great privileges. I have no need to tell of the festivities, the street crowds, the ringing of bells, the shoutings in the streets, and whatever else was done to make the duke believe that he was welcome. It was all on a large scale, and the shouts were loud because it was known that the prince desired them so. To

please him the people were prepared to do a great deal—to smile instead of scowl, to receive the duke as one would receive a mongrel dog if it would please the giver who was greatly loved. No man on earth save the Prince of Orange could have prevailed on the Netherlanders to give a shout for such a duke as his Grace of Anjou.

The day after our arrival Schetz and I were standing at the window of our lodgings, looking across the open square at the Halles, which was surmounted by the famous belfry, whence many a call had come in bygone days when danger threatened, or some great movement was afoot. Beneath the trees which surrounded the square were holiday keepers who had come from all parts of the city, and from villages and hamlets outside the walls, to watch those who were going in little bunches to the council chamber where the banquet was to be held.

Standing there we looked down on as gay a scene as any part of Europe could produce, for no people have such a love for fine apparel on state occasions as my countrymen. None would have thought, to look out on the people who loitered within sight, that many of them had seen the ghastly spectre of famine in their time, and that not many months before everyone had been full of apprehension as to the future.

Through the open window came the sounds of laughter, and the gay and free comments of young men and maidens on the dress and bearing of those who made their way toward the high-arched doorway beneath the belfry. Now and again there was a bit of good-natured badinage, as when a well-known citizen, not wont to dress himself in rich garments, went forward in chain and gown. Occasionally a Frenchman of high degree passed to the Halles, criticised in terms which were more honest than polite—one, as Schetz caustically observed, who was insatiably greedy for offices and wages, so that some day he might return to Paris to spend his gains.

Presently was heard a fanfare of trumpets, and along the way made by the opening of the crowd came the archers and halberdiers of the bodyguard, in whose midst rode the Prince of Orange and the Duke of Anjou, both of

them clad in their most splendid robes, and wearing orders which blazed with gold and precious stones when the glowing sun rays fell on them.

As the little procession made its way toward the spot just below us, and then took its sudden turn to the right, to pass across the square to the entrance to the Halles, my attention was attracted to three men who followed the riders on foot. Forgetful of everything else, I stared intently at them, but more especially at him who walked in the middle—a short, lean-looking man, with a shambling gait which reminded me of one with whom I was well acquainted. The face was strange, and yet seemed familiar, but how, or why, I could not have told anyone. There was simply the sense of familiarity—a conviction that I had somewhere seen that same man, and under strange circumstances. But that was all I could have said.

"What are you gazing at?" asked Schetz, placing his hand on my shoulder and leaning forward with me, as if he would discover what it was that so attracted me.

"At the middle man of those three," was my response. "Look at him well, and tell me whether you have ever seen him."

Schetz fixed his gaze upon him, and, as if speaking to himself, recounted the various points about this stranger in whom I was so interested:

"A gentleman of the French court, without the courtier's grace, which may be due to that peculiar shamble in his walk—a lameness, perhaps—but splendidly dressed. A velvet cap, with a plume of feathers at the side; a doublet of Genoese velvet, woven in parts with silver threads; trunks of purple silk, with over-straps of velvet; a rider, judging by the spurs on his turreted boots, but not a rider if one notes his general bearing. Nor should I think him quite at ease in what he wears. There is an indefinable something about a gentleman and a courtier which is absent from that man. He is what I should imagine an artisan would be when you take him from the bench and clap him into velvets and silks which he has not proved. But that is nothing to do with it, I sup-

pose. You want to know who he is. I can not say. But what think you?"

"I can not tell what I think," said I, still scrutinizing the man who was now turning away like the others to walk across the square.

"By no means a soldier," Schetz observed. "He ought to have a straight back, and had he been well trained, his masters would have taken some of that twist away, even though he were born with it."

"A twist?" I cried quickly, the words having brought a sudden thought into my mind. "Listen a moment, Schetz. Do you remember that fellow at whom I threw a battle-axe when he dashed down the stairs and across the hall at Rotterdam—at the time when the envoys came?" I added, since my companion turned to me with a doubtful look upon his face.

"Yes, I remember," he answered. "But the man dashed across the hall at such a rate that I took no note of his appearance. You do not mean to say that this one reminds you of him?"

"I do. Now I have something to go upon, I'll dare swear that no two men ever walked like that, and had that same stoop in the back, and the twist of the shoulder. 'Tis Francis Guion, who is bent on winning the reward offered in the ban."

"But bethink you," exclaimed Schetz, incredulous in spite of what I said. "That was a common shopman; here is a courtier, and a man of wealth."

"Schetz," I cried impatiently, "do you forget that he is in the employ of those who would not stop at the expense of a gay outfit? 'Tis Guion or his double; for now I remember that he had a muddy complexion. The only difference is that this man has a mustache, whereas Guion's face was bare."

"Which means nothing," said Schetz, drawing away from the window. "Come, Blomberg, let us be going. If there is mischief afoot, we will do our best to frustrate it. If that is Guion, he is here to kill the prince."

Snatching up our caps, we hurried down the stairs and out into the square; then, pushing our way through

the crowd, and into the open space, we followed the procession, and the three who were not far behind it, up to the gateway. The horsemen had drawn up outside, the duke and the prince going in amid another fanfare, with the strange Frenchman and his two companions not far behind.

Advancing almost at a run, since these three men, if they meant mischief, had the prince almost at their mercy, we got in between them and my master, loosening our swords in the scabbards as we did so, to be ready for emergencies. It had been my intention, as soon as we had got behind the prince, to turn round and confront the gallant whom I suspected, but at that moment my master chanced to halt and looked about him. Espying us, he held up his hand and called us forward, bidding me, when we came up to him, take a message to the captain of the bodyguard. By the time he had told us fully of his wish two or three minutes had gone; then he passed on in the duke's company to the banquet chamber.

Meanwhile the three men had halted, as others had done who were following, seeing that the prince was talking with us. As soon as my master moved forward we looked for them, and to our surprise there were only two, both of them, by their dress and general bearing, Netherlanders. The French gentleman had gone. Of one thing we were sure, that he had not passed into the banquet chamber; but look where we would, he was nowhere to be seen.

"Where is that French gentleman with whom you were walking?" asked Schetz, stepping forward and accosting the Netherlanders, while I was still looking in all directions to be assured that he was not hiding anywhere.

"We do not know," replied one, in a peculiar accent, which attracted my attention, and my companion's also. In spite of the many dialects one knew of in various parts of the Netherlands, there was nothing that was anything like this which marked the speech of the Fleming.

"What became of him that he disappeared so sud-

denly?" I interposed, scrutinizing the faces of both men, who, however, did not flinch from my gaze, but looked at me boldly, as if they had nothing to hide.

"We do not know," the second answered. "He joined us while we were making our way through the crowd, and saying that he was going to the banquet, as he supposed we were, began to talk of the duke, and so walked on. When we halted just now he put his hand to his lips, and saying that he had forgotten something, and would have to return to his lodgings, he disappeared. That is all I know." The two men bowed and walked forward when the speaker had ended.

On inquiry we found that some one answering to the description we gave had passed out at the gateway and crossed the square; but no one had any idea as to his name or whither he went.

"If you see him again, captain, detain him, for I have reason to suppose that he has designs on the prince," said I to the officer in command of the archers and halberdiers of the bodyguard.

Not long after that we entered the banquet chamber, having done as the prince desired.

"What think you of those two men, Schetz?" I asked, as we walked past the doorkeepers, who, knowing us, suffered us to pass in without hindrance.

"That it would be well to keep an eye on them," was his quick response. "I do not believe that they are Netherlanders, and if they are not, their disguise must mean that mischief is afoot. Let us look for them."

By this time we had entered the gorgeously decorated hall where the prince and duke sat, the tables being lined with burgomasters and other men of note, councillors and the like, in the splendid civic uniforms which had become famous throughout Europe, and peculiar to the officials of our country. Not even the Spanish nobles could vie with the grave magistrates of the Netherlands, and the years of oppression had in no sense destroyed their love of display at great public functions.

Having occasion to carry word to the prince concerning the messages he had intrusted to us, we passed down

the hall slowly, looking intently at everyone on the way, to discover for ourselves where the suspected men were sitting. But we could see them nowhere. Walking up to the small table which stood on a daïs, and where none sat but the prince, the duke, and the burgomaster of Bruges, we told the prince what he desired to know. That done, we stood aside, intensely worried and mystified, and looked out of the window which commanded a view of the square.

"Schetz, what say you to our searching the place for those two men? They came into the hall, but are not here now. I can not dismiss the idea that they mean mischief, else why should they disappear?"

"Come, then, Blomberg. We will begin by looking behind every curtain, but in a casual sort of way, not to attract attention on the part of the gentlemen at the tables."

Following out my comrade's suggestion, we went slowly down the side of the room which was hung with costly tapestry, most of it woven in the looms of Bruges, and depicting the great events in the city's history. As we went we kept close to the wall, feeling in every niche for anyone in hiding, halting at every window, scanning the tables also while we walked forward, but doing it with an apparent unconcern. None would have thought us anxious concerning a possible attempt on the life of the prince.

The search was a vain one until we came to an anteroom where the wines were deposited. The place, when we glanced into it, was empty, so I thought; but Schetz, drawing me into the folds of the heavy curtains which hung at the doorway, whispered to me to look in the niche where a golden flagon and three cups were placed. They were set apart from the rest, standing upon a tray, as if in readiness to be carried forth for the use of those who sat at the prince's table. There was not much doubt about that, for the other flagons were of silver, and the cups likewise.

What attracted our attention, however, were the stealthy movements of two men. One was peering from

behind a curtain close by the table on which the golden flagon stood. His head was far enough out from the folds for us to see that he presently turned, as if to some one close by him, and then another head came forth. This second man also looked about, and after the lapse of a few moments left his hiding place, went to the golden flagon, and lifting the cover with one hand, shook into the vessel the contents of a little package, the other still keeping watch while he did this. The cover fell with a slight metallic ring, and the man turning quickly, hurried back into hiding again, halting a moment, however, for a swift glance round, as if to assure himself that no one had seen him. Not a sound could be heard save the man's quick footfall on the floor, and what seemed like a whispered call from his companion still in hiding.

"What devilry is afoot now?" whispered Schetz savagely.

"Poison, and for prince and duke alike, as one can easily believe, since the fellow only touched the golden flagon," was my response. "Bring in some of the halberdiers, or anyone, and we will capture these men."

While I kept watch, so that the men should not slip out, Schetz disappeared. He was not away long, but long enough to cause me to draw my sword and hold it in readiness. Keeping an eye upon the curtain, and the tapestry which hung loosely down the walls from ceiling to floor, I saw the curtains move. Then the tapestry swayed, as if some one was behind it, and slowly the movement passed down the length of the wall. The men were coming behind the hangings on tiptoe, so that no sound should betray their presence. They were not more than a couple of yards from where I stood, eager and excited, my whole soul boiling at the thought of this murderous attempt of theirs, and my mind steeled resolutely to slay them rather than suffer them to escape. Yet I was longing for Schetz to come, lest, since there was but one to withstand two, they might escape in the commotion. They came nearer by another yard, and in spite of the loud laughter and conversation in the banquet chamber, I thought I heard the heavy boots falling on the polished

floor, notwithstanding their precautions, and heard also the rustle of the clothing behind the tapestry.

In another moment or two, unless they halted, I should be face to face with them alone. The men had been moving forward, never once staying in their progress until they came to a certain spot, and there they halted, as if to listen, and be sure that they could travel the last yard with safety. If once they could reach the heavy curtains they could watch their opportunity for slipping away unnoticed. Perhaps they would wait to know the outcome of this attempt, and, to judge from the fact that everything had favoured them, they might well believe that the prince was as good as dead. Neither knife nor pistol had as yet succeeded. My master, what with precautions of faithful servants and providential interference, had so far frustrated the attempts of his enemies, and the ban had not availed the would-be murderers and their instigators. God helping me, I thought, they should miss this time also.

A hand fell on my shoulder unexpectedly and startled me. Looking round quickly, not knowing whether danger threatened, I saw Schetz. Behind him stood three soldiers with drawn swords, waiting for the word, and ready for a scuffle. They had come so silently that I had not heard them, and of course the men behind the tapestry were unaware of their presence.

"Where are they?" said Schetz, whispering in my ear.

"A yard away from here, behind the hangings. See!" I whispered, drawing aside for him to take my place, so that he might see how the tapestry was hanging.

Schetz looked, and then stepped back to give instructions to the soldiers, who passed with him on tiptoe into the room, where they awaited the word from him.

"Now!" said he; and at that moment he tore down a curtain, and the two men stood revealed.

They gazed at us with startled eyes, but their hands went instantly to their weapons, as if they meant to make a fight. They had not time, however, for the soldiers were on them, grappling with them, and flinging their strong arms about the strangers' bodies.

The struggle, however, did not pass by in silence, for one of the soldiers receiving a heavy blow in the face, struck back again so fiercely that the fellow fell to the floor with a loud cry of pain. The room was filled immediately. The guests at the table, who had watched curiously when the soldiers passed through, sprang to their feet, and rushed to see what mischief was afoot. This put a stop to the banquet, and the great hall was a scene of alarm, many fearing that an attempt was being made upon the prince, leaving their places, and hurrying to surround and shield their beloved master, standing about him with swords unsheathed, ready to cut down the first who sought to do him harm.

For a time none could tell what had happened. The struggle in the ante-room was quickly over, and the two Flemings, bound hand and foot, lay helpless, but swearing, on the polished floor.

Bidding some one keep watch over the golden flagon, Schetz and I made our way through the crowd of excited burgomasters, that we might set the prince's mind at ease.

CHAPTER XX

CAROLINE AND ANJOU

For a time this attempt alike on the lives of our own prince and that of the unwelcome duke created a more favourable feeling toward Anjou, especially when the would-be assassins told their story, hoping thereby to get off with smaller punishment. But in an age when the death penalty was meted out for insignificant crimes such a daring attempt as the assassination of two princes by poison was not likely to be passed by lightly. The men to whom Schetz and I had spoken were the same two whom we captured, and on examination they proved to be no Flemings at all, but one a Spaniard, Salseda by name, and the other, Basa, a native of Florence, but in the pay of the Duke of Parma, who would not suffer the ban to be lost sight of. Guion had come with them, hoping for a chance to get near my master, so that in case the poison failed the dagger might be got home.

Many weeks went by, and then something transpired which gave me fresh reason to fear for Caroline. Since the death of the Princess of Orange, Catharine, Countess of Schwartzburg, and sister to the prince, had been her brother's constant companion, save for a break between my return to Antwerp after his convalescence and this visit to Bruges.

We had once more returned to the prince's house at Antwerp, and found her there, and she expressed her intention of staying with her brother to look after his comfort, since, from what she had heard, he had been in poor health of late. She had one day came upon him unawares, when he was seated in one of the gilded arm-

chairs of his council chamber, and throwing her arms about his neck and kissing him fondly, declared that he should have her company, whether he would or no, until she had nursed him back to full health again. His grave face, pallid with intense application and continuous care, became all smiles when he turned and saw who it was that had come upon him, but his serious look returned when he said quietly:

"I am afraid, Kate, that you will have to stay a long time, for the wound which that rascal Jaureguy inflicted troubles me night and day."

"All the more reason, brother, why I should be with you to nurse you when you need the nursing, and see to your home life being happy," was the affectionate response. "But I must have my ladies with me," she added, looking up into her brother's face from the place where she had seated herself on a small stool.

"As many as you will, Kate."

I was in the room at the time, standing back, however, where I thought myself unseen, but the countess caught sight of me.

"Ha! Master Blomberg, I did not know that you were there," she exclaimed gaily. "Ah, well! you heard no secrets, or if you had done so, my brother and I owe so much to your fidelity that we could well forgive it, and know, also, that you would not have betrayed us."

I bowed, pleased at these words, and assured her that my master's weal was my great concern in life.

"Saving your love for Mistress Caroline Hesselaer," said she mischievously. "Does not that come first?" she asked, with a bewitching glance, as if she would surprise my secret.

"Nay, madam, that is a question hard to answer. It is true I love my mistress, but as a servant of the prince he has my service and my loyalty, even my very life."

"I know it, Blomberg," said my master, turning to me with a smiling face. "Had it not been so, perhaps I had not been here. But, Kate, desist. Why should you pry into a gentleman's concerns?"

"Now, brother, let me say and do what I will. If Master Blomberg and I should quarrel concerning his mistress, that is his concern and mine, not yours."

She looked at her brother with a smile upon her handsome face, and then at me with another so pleasant that it not only showed how happy she was, but made me count it good payment for any torment such as hers.

"And where is Mistress Hesselaer?" she asked presently.

"With my aunt and sister at Leyden, madam."

"Then I pray you suffer her to attend on me a while, for when I saw her with the princess I thought her very sweet and beautiful."

Of course I could not refuse, although it meant bringing her into close proximity to the duke, whose intentions were so base. Yet, thought I, if he dared to molest her, his rank should not serve him. He should suffer as any rogue on the wayside should if he laid hands upon the woman I loved and was to make my own. I knew not what the spirit of the French might be in the matter of rich and powerful nobles appropriating a man's mistress—whether the deprived one took it tamely or met the intrusion with resolution; but this I knew, that if the duke dared to lay a hand on Caroline he should rue it in some way, just as impulse or opportunity found me.

When Caroline came back to Antwerp the duke was away, and since we rode into the city late at night, the gates being opened by the prince's special order, he was scarcely likely to know, however watchful his men might be. No one could have supposed that there was a maiden in that little group of horsemen, but rather that the company consisted of Schetz, Meerman, myself, and a page boy who rode at my side. It was not an unnecessary precaution to bring her in this guise, for, while the Spaniards were losing on all hands, and ceasing, therefore, to be such a cause of anxiety, the prince's blind confidence in Anjou was becoming a source of trouble already to the people, and the courtiers who accompanied

the duke were emulating their royal master, playing fast and loose with the inmates of many a Dutch home. That epithet—King Stork—coined on the jetty at Flushing, fitly described the Frenchman and his followers. Many a home was being intruded upon, not, it is true, with the fatal persistency of the Familiars and the creatures of the Blood Council, but by those who had no care for a woman's honour and helplessness, and that fact, to many, was a source of sorrow.

Now and again the duke was absent on similar errands to those which took him to Bruges, the prince going with him to induce the people to put more of the spirit of enthusiasm into their sullen welcomes, and during those times I breathed freely. The countess had expressed her wonder when a pretty page boy entered her chamber, and introduced himself or herself—I scarcely know how to put it here—as her waiting maid. That led to explanations, and to a more pressing care for Caroline's safety. But with the duke away, we had many a glad hour together. We rode up and down the city streets; loitered, too, about the harbour, which was beginning to show signs of prosperity that had been absent ever since the King of Spain's father had abdicated. When the fancy took us we rode out for a scamper across the polders, there being no fear of rough soldiers, such as there had been not long before. Sometimes the countess chided us when, in answer to her inquiries, we told her where we had been riding.

"What if the duke's men should be on the lookout for you?" she said one afternoon, after we had come in from a long gallop by the riverside.

"Nay, madam, Master Blomberg would be a match for any two his Grace might send after us; and if he were not," added Caroline, after this simple expression of confidence, "I have this, and should use it." Thereupon she drew a slight but keen dagger from her bosom, and held it up boldly for the countess to see. "I know how to use it, madam," she said. And she was right, for more than one had had cause to know it in that desperate struggle in the forest of Soignies.

The countess smiled at the brave look on the maiden's face, but shook her head and bade her be careful.

I think that the duke was in absolute ignorance of Caroline's whereabouts, for I neither saw nor heard anything of the men who had dogged her at Leyden. But the ignorance only lasted for a time. One day in October my master returned to Antwerp in Anjou's company, and Caroline and I were with the countess when the trumpet calls resounded through the streets.

"My brother returns," cried the countess, going to the window. Forgetful of everything in the pleasure of seeing the prince come home, we stepped forward when she turned and beckoned to us to take our places beside her. The procession was passing at the moment in the street below. First rode three trumpeters, clad in blue and gold, with silver trumpets which made sweet music that ran along the narrow streets and brought out the people to their doors to see his Highness—a sight of which they never tired. Then came the mounted archers and halberdiers, and after them the gentlemen of the prince's household, followed by the duke's attendants. A hundred mounted men at arms came after the prince and duke, who rode behind the royal household side by side.

As the two passed by, the prince turned his face in our direction expectantly, gravely smiling while he saluted his sister, who flung her kiss of welcome to her brother, and so expressed her pleasure at seeing him again. The duke, forgetful, perhaps, or indifferent to the fact that he was passing the prince's mansion, had taken no notice until he saw my master saluting; then, turning in our direction, he doffed his cap in homage to the countess.

But while he did so a look of surprise came into his face, and graceful as his greeting had been to the countess, there was such a marked difference in the salute for Caroline that the elder lady flushed with anger. I had seen the look upon her face, and she knew it, for when Anjou had passed she spoke.

"Do not think me jealous, Master Blomberg, because his Grace treated Caroline with greater courtesy than he

paid to me. I would not be jealous of you, my child," she added kindly, taking Caroline's hand when she saw the flush on my loved one's face. "'Tis because this sovereign of the Netherlands should dare to cast his eyes on such as you that I am angry." And she drew Caroline to her side, and put her arm about her.

"There is trouble in store, I fear," she added. "But we will watch yonder duke well, and circumvent him yet."

After that his Grace lost no opportunity of speaking with Caroline, and once, when he got her to himself, away from all the others who were talking in little groups about the floor of the banquet hall, he drew her into a recess where he could talk with her unobserved. What he said to her Caroline would never tell me, nor do I think she ever told the countess; but when she turned away in hot anger the duke put a hand upon her arm, and craving her pardon, begged her to listen to his suit, and consent to be his duchess. When she resolutely refused, and turned again to leave him, he flung his arm about her and declared that she should not go until he had received the answer he desired.

"Your Grace, if you detain me I will call for help," she said emphatically, releasing herself suddenly from his grasp. "How dare you lay your hand on me?" she added, holding him at arm's length when he yet sought to keep her.

Something in her look cowed him. At any rate his hands dropped, and without another word, forgetful of the courtesy due to a woman, he turned his back upon her, as if she had been one of the kitchen wenches, drew the curtain aside, and walked down the hall, his blotched face more repulsive than usual by reason of the evil look upon it. What chanced between him and the prince, who accosted him, I do not know; but I, who had seen him come out from behind the heavy curtains, moved by a strange impulse, as if assured that I should find Caroline behind them, walked down hurriedly to the place he had just quitted. Drawing the hangings aside and peeping in, I saw a woman upon her knees, her arms flung out upon the broad window sill in the recess, and her face resting

on them. I watched for a few moments, hesitating to intrude; but I knew that it was my promised wife who was kneeling there in an attitude of grief or passion, I knew not which.

Stepping in softly, I knelt beside her, and placed my arm about her shoulders. At first she started from me angrily, thinking that it was the duke returned; but when she turned her face to me and saw who it was, she flung her arms about my neck and told me what had passed—part, but not all.

"The other part would sully my lips to tell you, Bertrand, so do not ask me."

CHAPTER XXI

CATHERINE DE MEDICI'S LETTER

WHEN I had heard all that Caroline thought fit to tell me I saw her safe in the keeping of the countess, and went to my room. Flinging myself into a chair which stood before the blazing fire, I sat down and gazed into the dancing flames, as if to get some inspiration there. This persistency on the duke's part maddened me, and all sorts of plans ran through my mind, whereby his Grace might be made to know, once for all, that he was in danger if he annoyed Caroline any further.

But the more I thought the matter over the more did I realize my helplessness. What could I do against the duke without, perhaps, doing infinite mischief to the prince's cause? If I took up this quarrel ill words were certain to arise between my master and Anjou; and more than once it had been said among the gentlemen of his household that the prince, already alive to the fact that he had made a tremendous mistake, was tied hand and foot now that it was too late, afraid to protest too much, lest he should bring upon himself the armies of the King of France. France and Spain sweeping down upon the Netherlands in concert—as they were likely to do in such a case—would mean absolute ruin for himself and the people he sought so eagerly to serve.

This much, however, I resolved to do: to go to the duke, tell him what I thought of his action in regard to Caroline, and warn him as to what might chance if he molested her any further. This, to those who read my story calmly, may appear to be so much bluster; but those were days when plain speech was in vogue, and men

generally said what they thought without having any great regard to rank or wealth. Moreover, although I had no thought of trading on the fact, the duke was under some obligation to me since I had frustrated that desperate attempt to poison him and the Prince of Orange at Bruges. He had said so, and sought to induce me to accept something at his hands, but I had refused, saying, almost curtly, I must admit, that it was my custom to do my duty without having an eye to any reward.

"Nevertheless, although you will not take anything from me, Master Blomberg, I am indebted to you, and at any time shall be glad to serve you," his Grace had said on my refusal.

It would be a full hour before the duke would be likely to go to bed, and knowing this I started on my journey to the palace. It was dark, and the streets were empty, not now, as they were at one time, because the people had that dreadful fear of the Familiars, or of the rough soldiers of Spain, but because the night was cold, and the damp raw air that was coming in from the river made everything out of doors discomforting. The mist was settling over the city, and the lamps hanging at the street corners looked, when not far distant, mere blurs of light in the fog, growing larger and larger as one approached them.

Now and again I heard footsteps, but saw no one until the wayfarer and I stood in uncertainty before each other, one black figure dodging to pass another without coming into collision. One of these was a Frenchman, judging from his speech, for when he stumbled by, kicking his foot against a projecting doorstep, he cursed our climate freely, and anathematized all who were wont to live in it, the prince included.

"Come, Master Frenchman," said I, for I was in as ill a humour as he, although from a different cause, "keep a civil tongue in your head, or you may find that something else is bad in Antwerp besides the climate."

The man pulled up. There was the rattle which convinced me that he had clapped a hand on his sword, and

I supposed he glared at me. At all events he was no match for me, judging from what I could see as his black form showed up indistinctly in the fog; and doubtless when he saw my own great size he thought it best not to provoke a quarrel, but passed on, saying something which I did not hear distinctly.

Familiar as the streets were to me, I was much longer than usual on the way, having to go carefully, so as to avoid tumbling over obstacles, and needing also to keep well in mind the way I was treading, not to take the wrong turnings and lose myself. But after a time I came to the palace, and walking into the entrance hall, threw off my heavy cloak, which was wet and uncomfortable; then, going to the fire, warmed myself while I said that my business was with the duke.

"But his Grace is gone to bed," said one who stood near.

"Then I must see him there, for my business is pressing, as you may well believe, since I have come to do it on such a night," I rejoined, speaking with as little brusqueness as my ill temper would allow.

"'Tis true," the officer remarked. "No man ought to come for naught through a fog like that." And saying this, he told a lad to find out whether the duke had retired for the night.

As usual, the gentlemen who lounged in the hall and on the grand staircase stared at me with lazy insolence, as if they considered it an intrusion for a Netherlander to enter the place, forgetting that it belonged of right to his own countrymen, but, out of courtesy, had been placed at the service of one who had been begrudgingly accepted as sovereign. One, more friendly than the others, spoke to me while I stood stolidly before the fire, watching my hosen steaming; but when he found me so incommunicative, he dropped back and left me to my own thoughts, inwardly blessing me, I have no doubt, for a Flemish churl. But that I did not think about, since my mind was on the interview I sought.

Now and again when a log tumbled over on the hearth and flamed at my feet, I kicked it back viciously, wishing

it were the duke who took the kick. My temper grew no better for the waiting, so that when the page came back and bade me follow him, I felt somewhat disposed to pull his ears when I saw the contemptuous look on his face while he was speaking. These Frenchmen were little better than the Spaniards, judging from what I had seen when they thought themselves unobserved. They had doubtless come on the quest for gold to spend some other day on revelry in their own country.

The duke's bedchamber lay in the wing to the left, on the basement, and thither this malapert led me.

"Who may they be?" said he presently, halting so unexpectedly that I, taking no heed of my surroundings, almost threw him down when I bundled against him, treading so heavily on his toes that he picked up his foot in his hand and rubbed it ruefully, swearing as freely as any of the men in the hall would have done.

But that I cared not for, since I looked beyond him at two men who were coming round the corner at the distant end of the passage. The lights were numerous, so that I could see that they were French gallants, whom I knew by reason of their constant attendance on his Grace of Anjou. They walked forward leisurely, talking without reserve, and their words coming down the corridor, I knew that they were expressing their discontent that the "Son of France," as the duke was called by his countrymen, should submit to conditions, and rule as the States-General dictated, while his own brother had unlimited power within the French borders.

"'Tis unworthy of him," said one emphatically.

"But wait, La Fougère," responded the other. "The duke will bide his time, and then the States-General, the compacts, and all else besides, will pass for nothing."

"But he took the most solemn oaths, and on the cross, and even swore by some most blessed relics," said the other gravely.

"I had forgotten that."

Just then they halted at a door, looking in our direction indifferently, not even troubling themselves to wonder who I might be, but laughing somewhat to see the

swearing page hopping about on one foot, while he vainly hoped to lessen the pain which my heavy boot had caused. Four others appeared while the first two were laughing at the boy, and when they had come up the whole party entered the room, and the door closed behind them with a sharp click, which plainly showed that the key was turned in the lock.

The page heard this, and turned to me while he put his foot lamely to the floor.

"Was it the third door down that they went in at? I did not see for the pain you gave me when you crushed my toes."

"I am sorry, my lad; I did not know you were going to halt so suddenly."

That put him into better humour, although it did not much lessen the smart.

"Was it the third door down?" he asked again, somewhat more civilly.

"Yes."

"Then I fear you can not see the duke, since that is his room. What will you do?"

"Wait until he is at liberty," I answered. "Show me a place where I may await their going, and when they have gone come to me."

So saying, I held out to him a piece of gold, which lessened the pain, and even made him obliging and suave. Those Frenchmen were as keen on money as ever the Spaniards were. Slipping the coin into his empty pouch, he stood and considered.

"I ought to take you back to the hall again, but what need? It would mean a journey to and fro to no purpose. This room," he went on, pointing to the door immediately opposite, and lowering his voice, "belongs to the Seigneur du Plessis, and he is there now, sleeping, I wot. Egad! I hope he did not hear me swearing, for he is a Huguenot who never swears, and rates us soundly if we do. The worst of it is he knows my voice, and should he be awake—may the Holy Mother forbid!—he will lecture me for a full half hour to-morrow. Yonder room is the duke's writing chamber. You could wait there.

But be quiet, for if his Grace knew that I had put you there he would nearly flay me. Didst ever see him angry? There is not a trooper in France who can swear so, and although men call him the pock-faced dwarf, he has a hand which, when it comes upon the side of your face, makes you see a hundred stars, and leaves a sting behind which lasts for an hour or two. He has nearly made me silly for a whole day when it pleased him to box my ears. Come, on your toes," he added, going forward quietly, and throwing open the door with the utmost care that no sound should follow. "When Monsieur La Fougère and the others are gone I will come and fetch you," he whispered, as I stepped across the threshold on to the heavily carpeted floor.

Then the door was shut, and I walked over to the fireplace to wait. But had I known what was in store for me I might have hesitated. Had anyone told me that I should soon have knowledge which affected the safety of the state, and yet had told me also the price I should have to pay for it, I should have been constrained to halt and weigh matters well. A man may be prompted by patriotism but be brought to a point where the charges are so great that he must needs wonder whether it were not better to slip away, even at the cost of foregoing duty.

I was unconsciously at that point when the lad, giving me a nod, as if to bid me be cautious and not betray my presence, shut the door and went away limping.

Left alone, I turned my back to the fire and looked round the handsomely appointed room to see what was likely to serve to while away the time of waiting. There was a long table in the centre, strewn with papers, and a silver casket, gorgeously chased, stood somewhat near the edge, as if the writer who had last sat upon the chair had been engaged in searching for something among the loose contents. Small packages of parchment, bound round with light blue silk, or half opened, lay about on the table, and even on the floor. One, indeed, was at my feet, open for anyone to read, written in large, bold characters, plain enough to be seen in the glare of light which

filled the room, and came from the score of silver lamps hanging on the walls. In the careless look I saw two or three sentences, and without intending to read them they were known to me. It had been my thought to turn round to the fire, since these things did not concern me. Then, in the very act of doing so, those words were caught sight of, and filled me with alarm.

I turned full round and looked into the fire, half hoping that my fancy had played me a trick. In my restless movements I stepped backward, and hearing the crisp rustle of paper at my feet, looked down and saw that I had trampled on the document from which I had turned. Kicking it aside impatiently, as if it vexed me to have this temptation so near, the paper turned over, and at the bottom was the bold signature of Catherine de Medici, Anjou's mother. It was a letter, therefore, which I had no right to think about. But equally as plain were two or three sentences which filled me with absolute horror by reason of the suggested perfidy. They were read, like the others, almost before I knew:

"Whatever comes, my son, the Netherlands must be won over to the Holy Catholic religion; ay, even at the cost of a massacre like that of Saint Bartholomew's Eve."

All thought now of being guilty of prying into matters that did not concern me vanished instantly, and with a face which was hot, and hands which trembled with anger, I bent down, and picking up the epistle, read it through and through eagerly, and almost savagely.

It was a letter from Catherine de Medici, whose name was already made accursed by the part she played in the murder of Coligny, and that awful massacre of Saint Bartholomew which had overwhelmed France, and left a stain on the country's history which nothing will ever remove. I read it, as I have said, through and through. The royal mother was telling her son of her hopes concerning him, and her desire that, come what would, he should win back the Netherlands to Mother Church. It was to be done at all costs. If needs be the Inquisition must be introduced again—anything that would break the back of heresy, and force the people to submission.

"Begin at once, my son," were her closing words.

Without staying to think whether I ought to take the letter away as a damning proof of what the duke was urged to do, or leave it where I had found it, I followed the first impulse that came, and thrust it into my doublet. His Grace had not yet complied, but might it not be for want of time? Who could tell how soon he might betray us, and make the Netherlands as much of a shambles as Alva had done?

I stood a little while, gazing into the fire again, thinking out my plans. A few moments of irresolution followed. I put my hand into my bosom and drew out the letter, intending to throw it back to the floor again. Yet, when I was about to let it fall, I thought that to tell the prince would be but to make him look at me and wonder if I had gone clean mad, or was dreaming of this. After so many oaths, he would have said, and after so many safeguards, the duke was to be trusted. Whether my master would believe me or not, he must be told. He ought to know what the queen mother was endeavouring to persuade her son to do—nay, what she was actually coercing him to do, since there were threats which were certain to shake the resolution of one like 'Anjou. Thinking thus, I put the letter back into my bosom again, and resolving to forego my interview with his Grace, crossed the floor, intending to quit the room and return to the mansion where the prince was lodged.

"Seeing is believing," said I, somewhat bitterly, for I knew how loath my master would be to believe the worst of the man he had induced the people to accept. "He may blame me for bringing this letter. But what of that? Will it not be better to have his censure than let the country suffer?"

To get to the door I had to pass down the room, the great table in the centre rendering this necessary. I could have gone to right or left, and chose the right without a thought. In so doing I came close to some heavy hangings on the wall, and saw what I had not seen before, that they divided a few inches, showing a doorway which led into the room beyond. There was no door, unless it

was swung so far back against the wall that I could not see it.

"That must be the duke's room," thought I. Then I halted involuntarily, for I heard voices. For a moment I hesitated, uncertain as to whether I would go on or linger a while. I decided to stay because of what I heard, but in so deciding I did that which nearly cut off my life, and brought to me such an experience that I tremble even now while I recall it.

CHAPTER XXII

THE CONSPIRACY

THE words which fell upon my ears were sufficient reason for my hesitation.

"What would you have me to do then, Valette?" It was the duke who was speaking.

"I would hang the prince at the first opportunity," came the reply.

"Nay, since he is a prince let us do him the honour of sending him into the next world in the headsman's company, Valette," said one, whose voice I did not know.

"Well, let him go to the block, De Fazy. I care not what you do with him so long as you get him out of this world."

"But the whole country would rise against me," came the hoarse reply of the duke, who spoke in such a tone that none could suppose that he was pleading for the prince, but only cared to choose a course which would secure himself. My master might live or die, for anything that he cared, provided he could seat himself firmly on the throne.

I missed the words which followed in my eagerness to place myself where I could hear more plainly, and, perchance, see as well. Behind the curtains I might remain unseen, and trust to being able to slip away when the interview was over. The heavy hangings into which I stepped at once sufficed to hide half a dozen men, had there been any need, so that none could tell that I was at hand.

Moving on slowly I was very near to being discovered, for I came unexpectedly to a spot where the curtains

parted, and stood out in the light, the hangings dropping back into their places, and away from me. In that brief space I saw the handsomely appointed chamber, the gorgeous four-post bedstead on which the duke lay, the heavy silk hangings depending from the canopy, the costly coverlet, the tapestry on the walls, the carved oak furniture, the ebony appointments, and the roaring fire in the grate, the flare and flame of which lit up the room and everything in it, seeming to kill the light of the silver lamps. It all came to me at that one startled glance. Not far from where I stood were those who might have run me through with their rapiers, if they had seen me.

The duke's face was turned somewhat aside, his attention fixed on the half dozen French gentlemen whom, not long before, I had seen enter by the door. Fortunately, for the most part, they had their backs to me, while they stood about the bed engaged in conversation with their royal master, whose rich sleeping costume was the only redeeming point about him. I had seen him at other times, when, for appearance sake, he put on his best looks, as if to ingratiate himself; but here, with no need for restraint, and with all his passions free of curb, he was to me more repulsive than ever. No cloth of gold or princely apparel could hide the lurking evil of his countenance. With prejudice in my own mind I had thought him ugly; now, with the indignation which had brought me to this house, and the added horror at having discovered his willingness that the prince should die, I could not think enough evil of him. In that flickering light, which brought out the lines on the face, and deepened the shadows there, I thought that even the Prince of Darkness could not be much more unpleasing to look upon. Others might not have thought so, but prejudice often plays havoc with one's judgment.

All this was the mere doing and thinking of a moment, for when I found myself uncovered, I drew back among the arras instantly. The talk went on as before, without word or sign from any in the room to show that I had been seen, or that any there had suspicion of an intruder into that conclave.

There is little need that I should set down the words that were spoken. Indeed, I do not carry them all in my memory, but I remember well the purport of what transpired. It meant betrayal of the country whose liberties Anjou had sworn to defend against the Spaniard and every other foe. It meant more than that. It meant the murder of the prince himself, if needs be, and if not by French hands, which those present declared to be impolitic, then by any who might be induced to make the ban effective.

"I can name one, your Grace, who will gladly win the prize that is offered by the King of Spain, and will drive home his dagger when he meets the prince for very hatred of him," said one whose name I knew to be Biron. "And if he were discovered the suspicion would never fall on you."

"Who is he?" cried the duke, his eyes ablaze with eagerness, as I could well see when peeping through the parting of the arras.

"Francis Guion, your Grace."

"But is he to be relied upon not to betray us?" came the anxious inquiry.

"Absolutely, your Grace. The man is actuated by two great passions, one a love of money, and the other an unspeakable hatred for the Prince of Orange. I think he would count himself well paid if he got not a single coin, but had the pleasure of seeing the prince's blood wet on his dagger."

"Then I will see him, and buy him with a thousand golden crowns. It will be easy work to put him in the way of meeting the prince at close quarters. But, by the Mother of God!" he added, beating his fist angrily on the silken quilt, "the prince appears to be invulnerable. Thrice, to my own knowledge, an assassin has got within striking distance, and did him no harm. Jaureguy, as you know, actually sent a bullet through his head, and he lives yet."

"Perseverance will do it, your Grace," exclaimed De Fazy, with cold-blooded levity; "and the last time pays for all the previous failures." It was said with as much

indifference as though he had been taking part in the whispered jest of gallants, or looking upon the thoughtless glee of some court damsels.

An hour must have gone by, and during that time I listened to the plan of their base conspiracy. It was the duke himself who set it forth stage by stage, and the others, who had everything to gain by it, approved, suggesting details where anything seemed weak or dangerous, but all as willing to effect the betrayal of our liberties as their royal master, who, leaning on his elbow in the bed, looked from one to the other with hungry eagerness, as if to read their thoughts, and see how far they were to be relied upon.

The plan was as base as anything that Alva had been guilty of. Freedom of worship was doomed. If the Catholics desired it the Inquisition should return. If the people would not willingly pay in their money to Anjou's exchequer and maintain his troops, then something equivalent to the Blood Council should be instituted. The towns in Flanders, to which, when he received his new title of count, he had granted the right of freedom from French garrisons, should be entered secretly and the burgher guards disarmed, and since he had no great love for the land which bordered Holland and Zealand, and preferred the provinces which lay on the frontiers of France, he would suggest to the Duke of Parma an exchange of cities. Where he succeeded in placing French garrisons by this infamous *coup*, he would admit the Spanish troops, taking certain other cities in their stead from the hands of Parma. That letter which was in my bosom, slipped for safety's sake between my silken vest and the coat of mail I never failed to wear, had borne its fruit, and Catherine de Medici was likely to repeat in the Netherlands all those horrors that crowned the eve of St. Bartholomew with lasting infamy.

It was bad enough to hear all this, and know that it was not a hideous jest, but something fearfully earnest—to know that a day was fixed when the unsuspecting cities should be captured, and the principal citizens put to death if they offered resistance, or dared to indulge in protesta-

tion. A pike thrust was to end the parley at its commencement, since everything would depend on swift and sudden movement.

This was bad enough, but I almost cried out in an access of scorn when the duke slid from the bed, and kneeling before the cross in the little oratory not far from where I stood, besought a blessing on his enterprise. Was it genuine? I thought a moment, and then remembered that La Fougère was so extreme a religionist, and such a bigot, and yet withal so powerful, that it was more than possible that Anjou had gone through with this show of devotion the more firmly to fasten the bond about him. Whatever La Fougère might be he was honourable, and I could see by his face that he yet hesitated to be a party to the breaking of a solemn contract which the Son of France had entered into with his hand upon the cross. When he saw the duke in the attitude of prayer, and heard him imploring the blessing of the Almighty on his infamous enterprise, it appeared to be sufficient. The man's honour went down before his bigotry, and as soon as Anjou had risen from his knees, he took his Grace's hand and swore to aid him.

"I do it in God's name, and for his sake, La Fougère," exclaimed the duke, looking into the grave face of the tall, slim Frenchman.

"*In God's name, and for his sake!*" said I, unconsciously repeating the words audibly, and losing all thought of my danger in the excess of my indignation. Was there ever such mad forgetfulness? It was my undoing. The duke dropped La Fougère's hand with a cry of fear, as if the voice, coming from he knew not where, was a challenge to his hypocrisy. I could see that red and bloated face grow pale, and the body of the would-be perjurer become limp. He might be brave upon the battlefield—they say he was—but here, with that challenge which escaped my lips before I was aware, he was filled with terror and trembled, while his great mouth was all agape.

Before a word was spoken I heard the sharp, shrill scrape of steel, as of a rapier being drawn out of its scab-

bard swiftly; a blade tore through the arras, and brushing past my hand, was embedded in the panelling against which I stood. A second of time had barely passed, during which I thought of the narrow escape I had had from having my hand pinned to the woodwork, when the arras was thrust through again, and I felt a quick sharp pain in my chest; but the rapier bent as its point dashed against the coat of mail, otherwise the blade would have pierced my heart.

Strangely enough, none had spoken during all that time, and when that second thrust came I sought to slip away toward the door by which I had entered. But the first rapier had gone so far into the wood that he who had thrust it in had not been able to draw it back, so that it stood there to bar the way against me. Then a hand swept back the arras, and I stood revealed to the duke and his companions.

"What means this?" cried Anjou with an oath, when he saw my face. "'Tis that accursed Fleming, Blomberg. Stand back, gentlemen. I will deal with him."

His rapier was already drawn, and he made a lunge at me, swift and deadly, before I had had time to draw my own weapon. It was stopped in its swift career and bent nearly double by my coat of mail. My own heavy sword once unsheathed, I struck up with all my force, and the light rapier went flying across the room, dropping into the blazing fire. In a moment I was on the unarmed duke, mad with the thought of my own peril and his perfidy, to say naught of my desire to avenge that insult he had given to Caroline.

For one of my weight, although he was powerful, he was no match, and when I flung myself upon him, and held him with my left hand by the throat, he fell with a crash upon the floor. Heedless of everything when my knees came on him, I held up my right hand to bring down the sword as one would use his dagger. A moment of hesitation on the part of those who were standing round would have been death for their master, but a strong hand wrenched away my weapon, another hand was on my throat, gripping me with awful strength, so

that I felt my eyes starting from their sockets, and my tongue protruding. To tear these fingers away, the nails of which were biting into my flesh, I suffered the duke to go, just as other hands were clutching at my shoulders. A moment or two later I seemed to be bounding through the air, and then my swift progress stopped. There was a crash. A thousand lights flashed, and when they had gone and darkness followed, my whole life seemed to go clean out.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW

If dying is like that sudden loss of consciousness which I experienced, it is not a painful thing. But the coming back was dreadful. My head throbbed, my throat was swollen, my body seemed to be all bruised and tender, the eyes felt as if they were bloodshot, and to move a hand was to incur fresh pain.

The memory of what had happened came slowly, so that when I turned my head and looked around I was prepared to find myself a prisoner. Voices were close at hand, although I saw no one at first; but now and again I heard an oath, such as soldiers are wont to use, and since it was in French, I knew that I was not among friends.

Occasionally a door was thrust open and a heavy-booted trooper came stamping in, his spurs clinking at every step; or another would tramp out, and be called upon to come back and shut the door to keep out the fog. That was the prelude to curses on the climate of my country, and a declaration as to what these Frenchmen thought about the people to whose assistance they had come. Doubtless they spoke the truth, and what they said showed that they felt as much ill will for the Netherlanders as ever their royal master did. To hear their curses, to know of their craving for plunder, their impatience of all restraint when they were so ill paid and their wages were in such arrear, and to hear them saying what they would do if ever the chance should come for plunder, one might well wonder where and in what the Netherlands had gained by the exchange. We had lost

Spanish brutality; the tender mercies of our new rulers and their mercenaries did not seem more desirable. One could readily believe that if Anjou did but give the word there would be as willing rapine and plunder as had been before they came.

I had lain a long time simply listening to all this, trying occasionally to turn my head, but desisting because it cost so much in the way of pain. At last I braved the pain and everything else and looked about me. I knew the place, for it was the palace guardroom. On the walls hung steel caps, coats of plate, boots and spurs, swords, drums, trumpets—everything that a soldier needed in active military life. In the corners were the long pikes and muskets of the men who placed them there while they went to the fire which blazed away in contrast to the fog that settled white and forbidding against the windows, or came into the guardroom like smoke whenever the door was left ajar. A great table stood between me and the fire, the warmth of which would have been welcome could I have got nearer to it. As it was, the entrance of every newcomer, or the careless saunter of a thoughtless one who was going out to brave the fog, caused a cold wind to sweep round to where I lay, so that it chilled me to the bone. Some soldiers were sitting at the table, eating their rations and drinking the beer which they had warmed over the fire, but they took no notice of me.

At last I stretched out a hand and touched one of the troopers. My fingers could not do more than reach one of his spurs, and for a time he took no notice of my pulling at it to attract his attention. Nor did he hear me speak in all that hubbub, where every man sought to talk louder than his neighbour. He even got up to go away, and swung his heavy boot over the form. That brought him within full reach, and clutching at his leg, I got him to look at me.

"What ails you, Master Fleming?" said he surlily.

"Where am I?" I asked.

"Where all should be who seek to kill his Grace," he answered, giving me a kick, and turning to pass on. I

remembered that kick when my turn came. But of that I need say nothing here, for 'tis no part of my story.

A couple of hours passed before anyone looked in my direction, so far as I could see. Then a trumpet sounded, and every man, save one, tramped out, taking his belt and weapons and morion with him. The soldier who remained stamped about on the stones for a time, striving to get his feet warm, and now and again he grumbled at the need for duty in such weather. Warming into better humour before the fire, which he stirred now and again with a pike that lay across the table when not wanted, he sang a coarse song such as was in vogue with the French men at arms. Presently he came round to where I lay, as if to see how I fared, and noticing that I was wide-awake, said something to himself and turned to walk away.

"Where am I?" I asked.

Catching my words, he halted and turned round again.

"In the guardroom," was his brusque but not unkind response.

"But why am I here?"

"Ha! how should anyone know better than yourself? You got into the duke's room and tried to strangle him."

"I? with half a dozen gentlemen about?" said I, half in scorn, for the thing appeared so ridiculous. "It was in fair fight and at the duke's own desire that he and I should fight out our differences while the others looked on. When his Grace got the worst of it they all flung themselves upon me, and I remember no more. Am I detained here, or may I, if I feel disposed, walk away to my own master, the Prince of Orange?"

So saying, I rose on my elbow, and sought to get on my feet.

"Nay, sir, you are a prisoner, and I am here to look after you."

"A prisoner?" said I, and yet in no surprise, for it was nothing to wonder at, that being found by conspirators who knew I had heard their plans, I should not be set free until their scheme was carried out. It was even possible that they would make sure of secrecy by killing

me outright; more than possible, indeed, almost certain.

"What will be done with me?" I asked, after a pause, during which the man looked down on me with easy indifference, and more inclined to walk back to the fire and feel its warmth than stand there and talk to one who had no claim upon his attention more than this—that he was to see that I did not get away.

"How should I know?" was the only answer, after which he went to the fire and stamped about at the hearth again.

I lay and thought, growing numb with the cold. Lying on the bare stones, with naught between my poor skin and the chilling ground but the clothing I wore, and with the wind coming into the place between the stout door and the hollowed doorstep, whence it ran round the walls to the spot where I had been flung, every limb seemed to be ice, and I was shivering as if with ague. Would the soldier hold out against a bribe? The thought no sooner came than I put him to the test.

"Soldier, come hither. I have something to say."

"Say on, then," were his words, when he had come to my side.

"Stoop, and I will tell you what I want."

The man went down on his knees, willing enough to hearken, I suppose, since a bit of diversion would lessen the monotony of his watch.

"Well?"

I never knew a man of fewer words.

"I want to get away."

"Impossible."

"Impossible if I pay you well?"

"What will be the good of money if they hang me to-morrow?" He shrugged his shoulders while he spoke.

"They need not hang you. I would make it worth your while to let me go."

"How much?"

"A hundred crowns."

"Not good enough." The soldier was about to get up from his knees, as if to end the talk.

"Two hundred."

"Nay, I had rather keep the only neck I have in good trim than have it broken."

"Three hundred," said I, growing more eager to get away when I saw that the man was not open to bribery.

"I like money well enough, but I like my life better. The duke would send men to follow me the world over if I suffered a prisoner to get away and then made myself scarce. You don't know him as I do."

"Then will you go and tell the prince that I am here?" I asked, thinking that if my master was made aware of my whereabouts he would insist on my being set free.

"If the prince got to know that you were here the duke would probably suspect that I had told him," was the discouraging reply. The soldier rose and went back to his place before the fire, and so cut the conversation short. Not one word more would he say, in spite of my offers. The thing was incredible to me, that a common soldier should be proof against bribery, even when I solemnly declared that none should ever know that he had gone to give word of my whereabouts.

"I'll see," he said, when I had finally thrown out such a bait that he could scarcely have been human to refuse. "I am on duty till ten to-night, but perhaps I could go then."

"What time is it now?"

"Five."

"Throw something over me," I entreated; "anything that will keep me from being frozen here, for I am so stiff and chilled that I can not move."

Hearing this, he came once more to my side, and partly lifting me in his arms, got me to my feet, and so away from that far-off corner to a spot much closer to the fire. There, within reach of its warmth, I slowly grew more comfortable. Bit by bit I seemed to thaw and felt disposed to talk, but he brusquely bade me be silent lest there might be listening ears about, and then it would be bad for both of us.

There were five long weary hours to endure before my friends would have any knowledge of my whereabouts,

and what might not happen in that time? I could easily understand that my keeper could do nothing until ten o'clock came. Now and again a soldier tramped in, banging the door with energy, as if glad to shut out the fog, which, however, was lifting somewhat. The man came in either to fetch a corselet or change a steel cap, or find some weapon which was wanted, and after a momentary stay before the blazing fire would go out again, wishing devoutly he had never set foot in the Netherlands. From time to time, for want of better occupation, I cast my eyes round the guardroom, taking interest in the most trivial things, and growing better now that the fire had warmed me through, I sat up and ate some bread and cold smoked beef, and drank a pot of wine which the soldier bade a boy outside get for me with the money I put into the man's hand. Something attracted my attention at the window. It was a face. I gazed eagerly, and presently thought I had made out the features, so far as the firelight would allow. When it disappeared, after long scrutiny of the room, I was assured that Peter Bakkerzeel had been there. Of course it was possible that I might have been mistaken, but I hoped almost against hope that it was he, for in some way he might effect my deliverance.

The hope came to nothing, for in less than half an hour after the face had gone a gray-haired officer came in, followed by a trooper who carried a bundle which he flung upon the table.

"Monsieur Blomberg, you must change your garb, and don these things," said the newcomer, somewhat brusquely, yet not altogether without courtesy.

"Why?"

"Ask no questions, but do as I say, and quickly, please, for time presses."

It was useless to demur and madness to resist, when at a call a score of troopers would come. Accepting the inevitable, and with suspicions that made my heart sick, I did as desired, and soon it would have been difficult to tell me for a Netherlander, or single me out from the troopers who had come in from time to time and

watched me at my strange toilet. Once I glanced at the window, but did not keep my eyes there lest anyone should have his attention attracted thither. There was that same face again, not so distinct as before, but sufficiently so as to make me certain that I had not been mistaken. Ten minutes later I was on horseback, like a score of others.

"Monsieur Blomberg," said the officer, "you are to go with us, but I must warn you that any sign from you, or any attempt you make to get away during our ride—so much as a word or a hand-lift—will be the signal for your death. The men have been told to shoot you down instantly."

He gathered up his reins, gave the order to advance, and the troopers clattered out of the courtyard.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE NIGHT RIDERS

THE fog had gone completely, and looking overhead I saw the stars shining, and the moon, at the full, was flooding the streets, so that it was possible to tell who the passers-by were as we rode along. The way led past the mansion where the prince was dwelling, and at the foot of the steps was a horseman of high rank, judging by his apparel and the trappings of his charger. A yard or two behind two others were mounted—gentlemen of the duke's bodyguard. The first horseman's face was averted, since he was stooping to speak to one who had his face so turned that the moon fell full upon it, and I knew him who was on foot for the Prince of Orange. He in the saddle looked round just then at my companions, and proved to be the Duke of Anjou. Heedless of the warning, I should have shouted for aid and declared myself, but the officer, divining my purpose, spoke quickly, yet in a low tone, and I could not do otherwise than pay attention to his words.

"A whisper, monsieur, and two bullets will be in your brain. See!" So saying, he laid a hand upon my rein, and pulled my horse partly round, so that I saw, although they were doing it unostentatiously, two troopers with pistols so levelled that had they pulled the triggers I should have been a dead man. It was too great a risk to run, although I was almost mad with excitement, yet sane enough to know that there would be no mercy for me.

Turning from these men to look at the prince again, half in the hope that he might see my face and so discover me, I saw the duke bow, and move to the front of

the squadron that held me prisoner. The prince stepped back without so much as looking in my direction, while the other two horsemen drew level with Anjou, who gave the word and led the way.

I can not describe my dejection. Had I spurred my horse toward the spot where my master was standing there would have been no time to tell him of that conspiracy which I was aware of. I should have been shot down before I could have spoken, and the prince would not have known me for any other than a French trooper seeking to escape. He was so strict a disciplinarian that he would never have interfered in such a case. I felt my face set in despair, and with hands clinching the reins, which rested on the horse's neck, and a low curse which the officer could not fail to hear, I suffered the gallant creature that bore me to go how he would.

He needed no telling. There was no call for the spur. The troop went on, the iron hoofs of the horses clattering on the rough cobblestones and striking fire occasionally as they advanced at a steady trot. Sometimes we passed some people standing in knots, or walking down the narrow winding streets, and mostly they drew back into a doorway, so as to make room for the horsemen. Some of them I knew, but if they saw me I was, to them, a French trooper, and nothing more. Had it come to a squabble, they would have run a pike through me, if one had been at hand, with no more compunction than into any of my companions. Schetz passed just before we reached the city gate, and stopped to stare at us. I looked at him, hoping that he might see and know me, but that was impossible. The moon fell full on his face, but mine was in shadow. The look I saw was not one of recognition; it was an ill-disguised scowl when he saw that our party was made up of Frenchmen.

The drawbridge at the city gate went down with a clang, the portcullis creaked as the wardens turned the windlass, raising it high enough for us to ride out, and when the gates rolled back we saw the moonlit land stretching far away before us. There were a score and more of my own countrymen within hand reach, and yet

I dared not say a word. When the great gates clanged together, and we heard the dull thud of the dropping portcullis, I wished that I had run all risks and made a bid for liberty. A man always has this chance, that an unexpected rush may disconcert those who watch him. The shots might hit him, but not fatally, and in my case, while the chance was a desperate one, it may have served me. Then the prince would have known, and the country would be prepared, and cities would not fall a prey to treachery, while the Frenchmen would have no scope for tyranny.

Such thoughts went through my mind, and I felt mad with rage and self-reproach to think that I had cared for my own skin when so many hearts might yet be broken, and such woe sweep through the land. It was too late now. I could have torn my heart out when I thought of what I had let slip through fear.

I had no care nor thought of what was going on about me. The ground, after so much fog, was treacherous, so that we rode on without haste—a slow canter, even, was more than the slippery grass would allow when we left the beaten road, which was lined with trees, and cast ghostly shadows across the way. The horses went along at a slow trot, so that a swift footman might have passed us.

More than once I thought I saw one such. I had turned my head a little to get rid of the sheer monotony of seeing the road sweep past below my eyes, and looked at an avenue of trees along the canal side not far away. From tree to tree something flitted, going as fast as the horsemen, and looking weird whenever the moon fell on it. Now and again there was the hoot of a night owl coming from those trees, as if from that flitting thing itself, but that, perchance, was fancy. Then, when we got away from the canal and swept across a polder, I lost sight of the moving figure.

Whither we were going I could not tell. There was nothing in the landscape on which I could fix my attention and thereby tell in what direction the duke was riding. Brilliant as the moon was, the monotonous

stretch of polder and moere was unbroken for hours together, save that at long intervals we rode through a thicket, or unexpectedly splashed and floundered in some marsh land. Now and again the moon glinted on bits of canal and on broad sheets of water which lay in the hollows. Wherever one looked while that silent band rode onward, things were weird in the moonlight. A hedge or a solitary tree did not look as it might have done in broad daylight, but became spectral and startling; and when all was hushed, and no sound came but the splash of water or the dull thud of a score of horses' hoofs on the soft earth, or the rattle of harness and the ring and ting of steel and the champ of bits, the men carried themselves with a subdued spirit, and declared it better to be in the rush of battle than in such solitude.

But the silence was not everywhere. Here and there, while the horses stamped on the soddened grass, we heard the croaking of frogs and other sounds, whereupon those strong soldiers crossed themselves. At times we could hear the yelp of a dog at a distant farm, and the neighing of a horse. All at once, when everything seemed most silent, there came an unearthly scream, right in our midst, as it were. Horses reared and swerved, and had my charger been a trifle better than those of the troopers, I might have got away in the confusion which set men swearing, as one way of covering the fact that they were full of fright. It came again, and then that same figure which I had seen before dashed across the open into a bunch of bush. One of the men saw it, and levelling his musket, fired. There came no answering sound, no scream, nothing to tell that anyone had been hit. The duke, swinging his horse round, demanded the reason for the shot. I think he had the idea that I had tried to get away and had been shot down.

"I saw the devil himself among the trees, your Grace, and so I fired," responded the man whose musket was smoking.

The duke, no whit less superstitious than his men, crossed himself and muttered a prayer; then turning, rode on without a word.

I saw no more of that flitting figure for the remainder of the journey. An hour or two later we drew up before a gateway which had a square battlemented tower of two stages. At the trumpet call the gate rolled open, and riding across the drawbridge and under a portcullised arch, we entered a courtyard, to the left of which was a great tower with corbelled angle turrets and battlements. The tower was full a hundred feet in height, it seemed to me, and standing out gaunt, yet massive, against the moonlit sky, which was beginning to fill up with floating clouds.

Halting with the others, I dismounted at the bidding of the officer, and then looked round the open space, seeking to discover, if possible, my whereabouts. But it was all strange to me. Directly opposite the entrance ranged some buildings which were occupied by the men at arms and the retainers, and to the right hand a banqueting hall, fronted with a terrace broken in the centre by a flight of steps.

I was not allowed much time, however, for observation, for after I had taken this swift survey of my surroundings the officer bade me follow a bent old man who had come down the terrace steps on hearing the horses' feet clattering on the cobblestones of the courtyard. As it was useless to resist I followed, while the aged servitor led the way when he had beckoned to a man at arms who stood idling near at hand.

Presently we mounted a flight of semicircular steps, and passing beneath a pointed arch, came into a panelled chamber furnished in costly style, the walls covered with squares of tapestry, arms, armour, and relics of the chase. Crossing to a doorway, we entered a smaller apartment, in which was a heavy table, set down close by a latticed window, as if so placed that those who sat there for their meal might also look out on the courtyard and see what was going on. It was covered with cold meats, and to one so hungry as I the sight served to sharpen the appetite. But for that bread and cold smoked beef which I had eaten in the guardroom, I had had naught for nearly thirty hours; yet it was a foolish thought of mine,

when my guide halted to take a key from the wall, that I was to have something of that tempting meal now spread on the board.

"Come, monsieur," said the man, with an indifference that jarred my pride. One would have thought that he would have been concerned at the arrival of a prisoner, and in the duke's company, too. But no. His "Come, monsieur," was as coolly spoken as though the hound upon the hearth was called. Doubtless he thought me nothing more than what I looked at a scanty glance—a French trooper whom the duke's officer had bade him lock up somewhere and securely. He had lived too long to have any curiosity left in him, I wot, and simply did what he was told to do, without troubling as to why and wherefore.

Turning away regretfully, I clean forgot my hunger and the pain I was enduring when I saw some one sitting on a chair, his spurred boots sprawling to the fire which blazed upon the hearth. The man sat with folded arms, while his eyes were fixed upon the glowing logs, as if he saw something there demanding his whole attention. Surely he was no stranger to me, I thought. When we were at the door he looked up, and I started when I saw who it was. I had considered myself in danger before, but that danger was as naught to what I felt myself in when, looking at the face with the lamplight playing full upon it, I saw that I was in the presence of none other than the Duke of Parma! There could be no mistake about those dark eyes and their piercing look, to say nothing of his close-cropped, bristling hair.

"Has the Duke of Anjou arrived?" he asked, and if I had had any doubt it was dispelled once for all, for none having heard the voice at any time could forget it.

"Yes, your Grace. He came not many minutes since," answered the old man, straightening himself as much as one so bent with age could do, and saluting. From him the duke turned and gazed at me, but I returned his piercing look with a certain defiance which irritated him, for he frowned and swung round to the fire again. He could have had no suspicion as to my identity.

My hoary-headed cicerone lingered a few moments, as if to know whether the duke had more to say, but finding that the governor's eyes were fixed again upon the logs, and that he was apparently oblivious of our presence, the old man raised his hand and beckoned to me; then, without a word, he led the way out of the room into a corridor. Down this we passed, turning presently to the right, and up some stairs, crossing another corridor, and up again, mounting continually and with so many twists and turns that the bearings were altogether lost, however much I tried to keep them in mind. We halted in the middle of some stairs. The old man could go no farther without resting, and would have fallen with sheer weariness had I not caught him by the arm and held him up until he had somewhat recovered his breath.

"'Tis strange that a prisoner should help his jailer," he said presently, looking at me in some surprise.

The man at arms had halted some steps below, and leaning against the wall, cursed the necessity for having to tramp so far with a Flemish boor. It was of no use to resent his insults, but the old man was worth an answer, since he had done me no harm, and was but following out his duty.

"An old man," said I, "whether my jailer or not, ought not to have such a journey as this. Must we mount farther?"

"Yes, monsieur; I have my orders."

"Then take my arm, and we will go together."

He exclaimed in surprise, but when I insisted he went up with me, step by step, until we came to a thick oaken door, studded with iron and strapped across, looking so strong that I knew if once I entered I should never burst my way out.

"Is this our destination?" I asked when we halted before it, and the old man fumbled in his bosom.

"Yes, but I must have dropped the key."

He searched again while I leaned back against the wall, looking at the door of what was to be my prison. How long might I have to stay there, and what might I have to endure? The reason for my being brought hither I

could not tell. There were a hundred places in the duke's palaces where I could have been secured, but why should I be brought here, so far away?

The old man was still fumbling about without success, and I made no offer to help him. Why should I? It had been mere pity for distressed old age that prompted me to give him a helping hand, but one does not often hear of a victim offering to sharpen the axe that is to behead him unless he was tired of life—which I was not. No! I loved it well, and had thought a hundred times of glad days coming, with Caroline for my wife. Standing there on that narrow landing, waiting to enter my prison cell, life seemed more precious than it had ever been, when the thought of her flashed through my mind, and for a moment I half resolved to make a dash for liberty.

"Come, Marot, what are you fumbling there for?" said the soldier, still half a dozen steps behind, as if he would not travel up one more than was necessary.

"I can not find the key, and must have dropped it on the way. My foot kicked against something when we quitted the dining chamber, but I thought naught of it; yet, I wot, it must have been the key we want."

"Then go down and fetch it," cried the man at arms roughly, and chuckling at the old servitor's discomfiture.

"I suppose I must, but it is a long way for my poor limbs," said Marot ruefully. "Could not you go, Jules?"

"Nay, I'll see you lame before I tramp down those stairs and up again. Go yourself, Marot."

My anger rose at the fellow's coarse-grained selfishness, especially when he suffered the old man to brush by him, and go down those steps slowly and painfully. It was all that I could do to keep my tongue still, but I had no desire to make my position worse than it was, and had I spoken it might in some way be made so.

"Leave the lamp, Marot," exclaimed Jules, just as the other had reached the first turn. "I don't care to be left in this place in the dark, and with a prisoner, too, who might drive his dagger into my doublet."

"The world would be little poorer if he did," said the

other snappishly, but setting the light on the floor and passing on out of sight.

For a time we stood where we were, the soldier's great form showing up by reason of the light which was so far below. Since he did not find me good company he turned his back to me presently, and stood with his fists on his hips and his elbows sticking out, as if to bar the way. I looked down at him, and a thought came, which, without thinking it over, I followed up at once. It might lead to liberty—who could tell? And if it did not, my end would be no surer than it was now.

I went down the steps stealthily, like some wild beast creeping on its prey. They were six steps in all before I could touch him. Four were already gone. Two more, and I should be on him, but he turned, as if he did not like my silence. Then he exclaimed in fear, for the dim light travelled up the stairs and showed my pale, set face. He must have seen in that glance that my eyes meant danger for him. Seeing me approaching, my hands ready to grapple with him, he clapped his hand to his belt to snatch at the dagger there. But I was quicker than he, and one hand was at his throat, gripping it fiercely, the other on the wrist at the belt. Swaying him to and fro, while a choking sound escaped his lips, perhaps to ask for mercy, I suddenly hurled him backward. His body fell with a crash, and his head struck on the stairs. There was no cry when he tumbled from me, and the body, limp and helpless, rolled over and over as in a somersault, until it fell upon the lamp; then it lay still in the darkness which followed.

CHAPTER XXV

THE MAIDEN IN THE LARDER

I WENT down to where the soldier lay, fearing by his stillness that he was dead; but while I knelt at his side to listen for his breathing he stirred, and began to groan slightly. Relieved to hear this, I passed down such stairs and passages as came in the way while I groped along, but there was no set purpose in my mind as to what I should do, now that I had taken this first step toward liberty. I had a vague hope that in the garb of a French trooper I might be able to move about with less chance of discovery among the retainers of the castle; but I knew full well that if Anjou or any of his men caught sight of me I should have gained no advantage from what now began to wear the aspect of a mad venture. The passages were in almost total darkness, the only light being an occasional smoky lantern hanging on the wall, or the light from some room which opened into the corridor.

After a time, when I had gone down many steps and along many twisting passages, I heard some one approaching, short of breath, and with many symptoms of distress. Before long this newcomer was close upon me, and from certain feeble ejaculations, and frequent halts to complain of the unreasonable task an old man had to perform, I knew that it was Marot on his way to the place where he had left me. I drew back against the wall, devoutly hoping he would not touch me, but he did.

"Ha! who is this?"

"No one in particular," said I, in a feigned voice, and

moving on after brushing his hand aside. He went forward, grumbling and coughing and panting, just as he had done before. It was a shame to keep so old a man at work, and at such work, when there were scores of able-bodied servitors who were well able to do it.

But that was not my business. My whole soul was bent on securing my own safety, so that I went groping on and on, sometimes stumbling down a step or two, and grabbing at the wall in the endeavour to save myself from a nasty fall. Once my foot slipped, and down I went, some twenty steps, perhaps, bruising my head and body sorely as I bumped against wall and stair, and came asprawl on the floor below. The noise must have been tremendous, for here the steps were of wood, and while I rose to my feet, rubbing my head and arms ruefully, I thought it impossible that some one should not come to know what was the matter. Such people of the castle, however, as were about at so late an hour, were evidently bent on other business, for no one so much as opened a door, and the only sounds I heard were the snores of those who slept in the rooms to right and left of me.

Going forward in the dark, I bumped against a door, my feet touching it noisily. I thought to turn away, but the door opened, and a pretty serving maid appeared, one hand on her hip, the other holding the latch, while she looked at me inquiringly.

"What may you want at the larder door?" she asked saucily.

"Naught, my pretty one," said I, putting as bold a face on the matter as I could. "I am a stranger in this great place, and have lost my way in the dark passages."

"Where do you want to go, then?" she inquired, twisting her pretty neck somewhat roguishly. Evidently she was used to the sight of soldiers, and had no dread of them. Looking past her I saw that the room in which she stood was the castle larder, for on the tables and the shelves around the walls were joints and loaves, pasties and capons—a score of things that served to increase the cravings of a hungry man, even though he were in direst peril, as I was.

"I want to go to my sleeping chamber, if I can find it," I answered as indifferently as I could.

"Well, then, turn full round, walk on and on, and take the first turning to the right. 'Tis in that part where the soldiers sleep."

She stood now with both arms akimbo, and laughed at my discomfiture. But she suddenly grew grave, and looked into my face keenly. She could see it well, for the light was full on it. Doubtless she suspected in that quick, shrewd glance that my indifference had been assumed.

"What is it you want? You look scared."

"I am desperately hungry. Give me something to eat, and quickly, for I must go. 'Twould never do to be found here."

"Nor would it," she exclaimed, "for 'tis against the rules."

"I did not know," said I.

"Well, don't come again. But take this. 'Twill put you on till the breakfast hour."

She snatched from the table a huge sandwich of smoked beef, and coming back to me, put it into my hand. "Go!" she added. "They would flog you if they knew," and laying a hand on my shoulder, she pushed me away. "Quick!" she whispered. "I hear some one coming."

She shut the door in my face, and while I halted in the darkness I heard her voice within, but what she said I can not tell. It was enough to know that the danger lay for the moment in the room, and not here in this dark passage. Being hungry up to famishing point, I greedily devoured the food the kind-hearted girl had given me, meanwhile feeling my way back again. I was like a rat shut in a trap, yet the bread and meat put new life into me, and in spite of my weariness and soreness of body I was ready to face my difficulties with better heart when I had swallowed the last mouthful.

It was a strange position to be in. I was wandering up and down the corridors, not knowing what to do. I dared not go into the guardroom, nor turn in at any door, lest I should be discovered. I was desperate enough, God knows, for without doubt death was in store for me

now that I had endeavoured to escape, and unfortunately I could make no fight for it, since I had not a single weapon about me. There were my fists, however, and they could count for something if we came to close quarters; but fists against steel or shot do not often come out triumphant.

My last mouthful had gone, and I began to straighten myself, blessing the girl who had been so kind, when a sound fell on my ears, coming from a distance, but travelling along the corridors with sufficient plainness to tell me what was afoot. A word came now and again which told me that my escape had been discovered. Doors banged together, and French and German oaths were frequent, as the heavy boots of troopers and retainers clanged on wooden floors or in stony corridors. I heard the hoarse voice of the Duke of Anjou presently, calling for silence; and when it had been followed by the greater uproar which such a call generally produces—one calling to another vociferously to be silent, and his neighbour adding to the din by a bit of extra swearing at the other's noisiness—words came which concerned myself.

"This fellow must be found, and I will give a hundred crowns to the man who brings him to me."

"Dead or alive?" cried one.

"Alive."

That was something for me if it came to fighting, but why did the duke want me alive? At the moment of the reply my hand came on a wall corner, and feeling about to know whether it was part of a doorway, or the beginning of a passage, I found it to be the latter, and hurried down it blindly, only bent on getting as far from my hunters as possible. After a time I halted in a doorway, not venturing farther, yet ready to go, on the bare chance of getting away, if harder pressed.

Nearer and nearer came the sounds of the search and the slamming of doors. Then the corner round which I had turned not long before came into view by reason of the approach of those who bore torches to aid them in their quest. I breathed more freely when I saw some men go, without halting, past the end of the passage in which

I was standing. They straggled by, one or two loitering at the opening, as if to prevent my slipping back if I chanced to be in the corridor behind them. My only hope lay in the unknown darkness, but even that was cut off before the men had all passed on out of sight. A brighter light than any that had gone by now appeared, enough almost to show up the whole of the passage in which I stood.

Standing well hidden in the doorway, peeping from its black shadow, I saw Anjou himself come into view with the officer who had taken me in charge when the journey began at Antwerp. They both halted while the duke questioned the two men already standing there.

"Has any one searched this corridor?"

"No, your Grace. They will do this part when they return, and meanwhile we are here to see that no one comes by this way."

"Then we will search it," was the duke's next word, and with that he led the way full down upon the spot where I was hiding. As he advanced I could see the gleam of his drawn sword, and caught sight of his angry face.

My last chance was to enter the room behind me. I tried the handle, lifted the latch, felt the door move at my touch, and slipping in, saw a large apartment into which the moonlight streamed through the lozenged windows. My entrance had been made in perfect silence, and with every care not to make a sound, I closed the door after me, not daring to push in the bolt lest it should scream as it slipped along. Without halting, as soon as the latch went down silently, I darted into the midst of the heavy curtains close by, and waited there in the ample folds, wondering what new turn of danger might come. The door was thick, so that I only heard the muffled sounds of men outside, but these grew fainter every moment, until absolute silence added on to my most welcome loneliness.

I now had time to look around upon a chamber more gorgeous in its appointments than any I had ever seen. Not even the state bedroom in which the duke slept in his palace at Antwerp could compare with it. A dull red

glow from the fire competed with the moon, and mingling with the silver light gave the place a strange, weird look, showing up a great apartment panelled in unpolished and richly-carved cedar. On the walls hung arms and armour which might have seen service three hundred years before, but weapons of newer make also had their place. A sword, which shone out redly in the fireglow, attracted my attention, and being within reach, I ventured across the room and took it from its place, appropriating it to my own use, buckling it about my waist in readiness if it should be needed. To my right stood a huge bedstead, whose massive posts might have hidden a man in them had they been hollow. Curtains depended from the canopy, and hangings from the bed itself hung down to the floor.

The thought came that I might find a hiding place beneath, and I put my hope to the test, but I found that it was boarded in. And the same with the bedstead at its head. It was thrust close up to the wall, not leaving space to slip the hand in. Costly furniture was spread about the room, and overhead was a ceiling with broad panels, in which the artist had set pictures, but in the firelight they were blurred and indistinct.

I had heard the men tramp back again to search elsewhere, and then silence fell, nothing being heard but the slipping of the glowing logs while consuming slowly. Then I thought I might safely venture to look into a recess over against the window, and find, if possible, a safer place than this, where one might chance to thrust in a sword to be assured that no one lurked there.

I was actually on the move, and the curtains dropped behind me, leaving me standing out on the open floor, when the latch clicked. I was back to my shelter in an instant, just as the door opened quickly, and a woman walked with brisk step across the room. As she passed the fireplace, and set a tray on the marble table, I saw that it was none other than the pretty maiden who had given me food in the larder. She stood a few moments looking down at the glowing logs, whose light played upon her, making a picture most pleasant to look upon. The saucy look in no sense raised any doubt as to her kindness of

heart, and when she stooped and grasped the iron hook to stir the wood, and flung fresh pieces on the dogs, a bold resolution came to ask her help in finding a safer place of concealment.

The outcome of that venture was one of life or death. If she screamed one could scarcely doubt the consequences. Her shrill voice would ring out into the corridor where others might be loitering. If she took the matter coolly when I appeared, she might betray me. Yet what could be worse than this uncertainty? this dependence on the swaying of the see-saw, a dip to right meaning life, to left death, and that, perhaps, after torture; what could be worse?

She turned away, so that her face was toward me, but lingered, as if she was loath to leave the warmth and go into the dark and draughty corridor. She had, indeed, begun to move when I stepped out from among the velvet folds, just far enough to be seen, still keeping one hand on the curtain, to slip back again, if necessary.

"My pretty mistress," said I, in a low voice.

She heard me, and looking up, saw me also, but did not utter a sound. Instead of that she halted, clasped her hands together, and looked at me; and, judging from the bend of her neck, she was peering at me earnestly, and with a startled look in her eyes. I could only guess at this, for her face was no longer visible.

"I am in peril. Can you help me?" said I, as she stood there, trembling, almost swaying with fright. Then, as instantly as she had been startled, she recovered herself and came toward me. Holding up her finger, as if to bid me be silent, she ran to the door, opened it, and halted there, looking, as I hoped, up and down, to see if the way was clear, but, perchance, to call in one of the men who were on the quest for me. A great fear came that I had misjudged her, and that she was going to give me up. But could a girl so kind looking play me false? And she looked kind when the firelight played upon her features. One generally reads character by the play of feeling on another's face, and I thought her tender hearted. Nor was I wrong. She came back in a moment or two,

and stood before me, nothing of coquetry in her, and honestly eager to be of service.

"What are you doing here?" she asked softly.

"I am hiding, and 'tis to me a matter of life and death."

"I know it. They are searching for you high and low."

"You will not betray me?" said I earnestly.

"Nay, surely. I have not so hard a heart as that, for one of my countrymen especially—for they say you are a Fleming. But let me think. Ha! I have it! Come this way."

She ran, while she spoke, to the head of the bedstead, and stooping, pressed her hand upon the massive post. There was a slight click, and then she pulled the lower portion of it outward.

"In here, and quickly! You will find room enough, for there is a recess in the wall, sufficiently large for two or three men. 'Twas the hiding place a century ago of a hunted lord of Flanders, who, feeling that his life was in danger, had this place prepared. None know of it now save my father, who told me about it, and he is in Paris, and will be for many a month to come. See!" she went on, going down upon her knees. "When you want to come out, draw back this little knob—so. And to go in, push back bodily this carved soldier's foot. In at once! I will come again when I can, and bring you food. Here! let me toss in these cushions. They will make it easier lying for you than hard boards." And she thrust in two or three which lay about on the chairs.

"Meanwhile, pretty one, think how I can get away."

"I will," she replied, when I slipped into my hiding place, the entrance to which was barely wide enough to admit my big body.

"What is your name?" I asked, as she was about to close up the doorway.

"Oh, never mind," she almost laughed, relieved to think I was nearly out of peril.

"Nay, but tell me."

"Then if you must know, I am Katrine."

Saying this, she thrust the door upon me, leaving me in darkness and alone.

CHAPTER XXVI

A NARROW ESCAPE

KATRINE had not prepared me for what was to follow, although she must have known in part how near the hunter and the hunted would come together. She had not been gone many minutes before I heard some heavy footsteps on the floor, and listening keenly, heard also the voices of men.

"Art certain that the men have searched everywhere, Straden?"

It was the Duke of Anjou who spoke, and had I not been certain, the reply to his question would have assured me.

"Everywhere, your Grace. Old Marot says that some one passed him in the passage, but the voice was not that of the prisoner who has escaped——"

"That goes for nothing," spoke up the duke. "A man with his wits about him would be sure to speak in a feigned voice when he wished to get away."

"True, your Grace," said he whom the duke had called Straden. "Before long," he went on, "the old man tumbled over the body of the man at arms lying at the foot of the stairs, and since the fellow has not yet come to his senses, we can not think what happened in Marot's absence."

"Hast been into every room?"

"Into every room that was unfastened, your Grace," responded Straden.

"How now? Dost call that searching? This Master Blomberg would go into the first room he found, and if it were empty would slip in the bolt at once. By this time

he is working his way out at some window, or, perchance, has already got into the open country."

"Nay, your Grace, a man once brought hither a prisoner is as fast as a rat in a trap," interposed Straden, with a confidence which reassured the duke, whose temper was at its worst. "But if you will it, another search shall be made, and all the rooms without exception looked into, save the women's."

"And why not theirs? 'Tis the women who will baulk us if they can, when a fine fellow like this Blomberg throws himself on their mercy."

"They would not like a lot of men tramping into their sleeping chambers, your Grace," suggested Straden.

"Out upon them, the squeamish jades! What care I for their likes or dislikes when that Netherlander is in question? He knows so much of my concerns that I want him taken alive, so that I may have his tongue torn out and his right hand chopped off. Then he can neither speak nor write, and can walk the world as he will. 'Twas because I wanted to keep him out of the way a while that I brought him here, and now he has escaped and will betray me!"

The very thought seemed to madden the duke, for he rose to his feet and strode up and down the room, vowing fearful treatment if he could but find me.

"But men tell me, my Lord Duke, that this same Blomberg saved your life at Bruges," said Straden, in a tone of honest expostulation; "and to treat him thus seems poor requital for such a service. Pardon me for the liberty, but 'tis the privilege of an old and tried servant to say what is in his mind," he added, when the duke had interrupted him with an angry oath.

"True, but old and tried servants must be made to know their place, and you presume too far, Straden," cried the duke hotly.

The other made no reply. Apparently he knew best how to deal with his master, and when Anjou bade him renew the search, and bring him word as to the result, there followed the sound of footsteps, and the catch of the latch as the heavy door was drawn together.

During this colloquy I had cautiously drawn back the knob, opening the panel ever so slightly, but sufficiently wide to watch all that was going on. The bedpost stood in the shadow, so that had I opened it to the full extent none would have seen it. The duke had flung himself discontentedly upon a chair, tossing his cap aside, and loosening his cloak at the collar. He still wore the suit in which he travelled, evidently being too much engrossed with greeting Parma to divest himself of any of his outer garments; and when the news came that I was gone, none knew whither, he had quitted the dining chamber to prosecute the search, without staying to throw off anything.

Straden stood on the other side of the huge fireplace, the glowing logs lighting up his careworn face. Was it possible, I thought, while he spoke as he did on my behalf, that I should find in him a friend who would serve me in my extremity? Scarcely. But without a doubt he was a man of honour, and there was this much to encourage me, that while he was not willing that the duke should mutilate me, as he declared he would, Katrine was already on my side. Could I but keep secret in my hiding place, she might find a way of escape from this stronghold, or contrive to get word to the prince as to my whereabouts if my imprisonment should be a long one.

A full hour passed when Straden had gone, and during that time the duke sat and stared gloomily into the fire, eating some of the food which Katrine had placed upon the table for his use. At last he struck the gong for his man to come and undress him, and finally got to bed.

A sense of security came to me when I heard the heavy breathing of my strange companion, for he was truly such; and being yet hungry, I ran the risk, crossed the floor, took from the table some of the food I found there, and carried it back to my place of concealment. There I sat on the floor and ate to my heart's content, leaving not a scrap, and emptying the bottle of Rhenish wine. Then, drawing the door together cautiously, I lay down, with Katrine's cushions for a pillow, and fell into a heavy sleep.

I awoke with a start, and looking about me, put out my hand for the sword which lay at my side. The narrow door of my retreat was wide open, and daylight was streaming in from the outer room.

"Good morning, Master Sluggard," said some one, following up the words with a low and pleasant laugh. Katrine was on her knees, partially blocking up the entrance, and looking in upon me with her face all smiles.

I sat up in an instant, although I was stiff and sore, and asked her how matters fared.

"Well enough, Master Blomberg, for so I heard them call you; but from what I can judge, they have an idea that you are not far away, and think they will yet find you."

"And will they?" I asked anxiously.

"Nay, why should they?" she answered naïvely; and the unaffected simplicity of her words and manner went further to set my mind at rest than a hundred words. If she had thought me in any great danger she would have shown it in some way, whereas she was kneeling there so smilingly, as if she only waited for me to come forth and go about at my ease.

"Why should they?" she asked again, when I simply replied by staring at her while I buttoned up my doublet. "You are half asleep yet," she added; "but see, I brought you this, and you may eat it at your leisure. 'Tis a capon, which I carried under my apron, and here is some bread. There is a bottle of wine in my pocket. 'Tis something wonderful to think how handy a woman's pockets prove at times. None would have thought that I carried food for a fugitive whom the men are going to have another hunt for presently. Nay, do not look serious. Why, Master Blomberg," she exclaimed, pointing at me with her forefinger, and laughing gaily, "one would think you could see their heads looking over my shoulders, you look so full of consternation."

"For God's sake, look round, Katrine," I whispered, snatching at my sword, and pointing past her into the outer room.

"Good lack!" she said, turning and gazing in the

direction in which I pointed, her smiling face suddenly turning pale, and her hands half raised and trembling. She recovered herself quickly, however, and pushing the bedpost door together, began to finger the tapestry and bustle round as though she were full of business, such as a woman might well be expected to be about in the early morning, where there was a bed that had been slept in.

"What are you doing here, Katrine?" said some one in a burly voice.

"My morning work, of course," she answered, with her voice raised high, as if he to whom she spoke were hard of hearing. I could see that it was so by the way in which the man at arms held up a hand to one of his ears, while I looked through the slightly opened doorway of my chamber. This served to set my mind at rest, for I knew that the soldier had not heard Katrine speaking to me. "But what made you come in here? 'Tis against the rules for men at arms to be prowling about the bed chambers at this hour." She stood up and faced the good-tempered-looking fellow saucily, speaking loudly enough to be heard in the corridor outside.

"Business, my dear. I want the Duke of Anjou's hunting horn, and Master Straden said 'twas here."

"Art going a-hunting, then?"

"The duke is, and I vow I hope 'twill work off his spleen, for he seems mighty angry at this Netherlander's escape."

"Hast not found him yet, Jerome?" bawled the girl.

"Nay, nor shall we, I think. There's not a corner which would hide a rat which has not been looked into, but he left no trace behind him," said the man, turning to look around the room. "Where's the horn, I wonder?"

"Here 'tis," cried Katrine, taking it from a chair behind her; and giving it to the man, with a pleasant nod, she began again to straighten things with that deft movement which a woman has the way of, and which to man's clumsier mind is akin to the miraculous, since it transforms an untidy place as if by magic.

"What would'st do, Jerome, if thou found'st him?"

she said presently, standing with a duster in her hand, and looking at him.

"Poor devil, we should have to clap him into the dungeon, I suppose," he reflected.

"He seemed a comely fellow," observed Katrine, with a grave face, "and 'tis a shame to treat him as the duke threatens. Let me think. What was it he said he would do if he caught him, Jerome?"

"Flay him alive if he did not fall in with his desires; cut out his tongue, chop off his hands, and I know not what."

"And would'st give him up to that—a handsome fellow like him to the duke? Shame on thee, Jerome. If I were a soldier I would hide him and set him free at the first chance," cried Katrine.

"So would I if thou didst but give me a kiss at the asking."

"Well, then, find him and set him free, and I'll think about it," she responded, bustling round again.

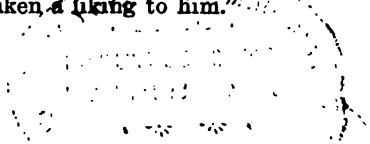
"I would fain watch thee work like that for many an hour, Katrine," said the burly fellow, with good nature in his voice and face, and a look which assured me that he had noticed nothing, and suspected naught concerning me.

He had come in, and I had seen him go down the room with his back toward us, and Katrine was busy on hands and knees, and the secret door thrust together before he turned round. But I had it open now, just wide enough to peep through the crevice so as to see what was going on.

"Ha! Thou'rt pleased to do aught but work, Jerome," cried the maiden saucily.

"Nay, that is ill natured," was the response. "I do my work as cheerfully as most, but 'tis enough to make any man ready to give it up a while to watch thy pretty face, and see thee flit about like that."

"'Tis all flattery, Jerome. But get about thy business, else the duke will make thy back smart. And mark you," said she, holding up her forefinger to him, "there is a kiss for thee as soon as the Netherlander has passed the gate. I have taken a liking to him."



"What care I, Katrine, if thou wilt but give me a kiss by way of a set-off?"

Taking her unawares, the fellow threw his arms about her, and gave her a couple of loud-sounding kisses, walking off with loud laughter, and deaf to all her half-angry protestations.

"That was a narrow escape, Master Blomberg," said she presently, after she had gone out to look up and down the corridor, to see that it was clear. She was wiping her lips with the corner of her apron while she stepped across the floor, as if she had no desire to retain the memory of those kisses, and her face was flushed up rosy-red, half with anger. "We must be more careful in future, else thou wilt find me more of an enemy than a friend," she added seriously. "But he did not see thee, for his back was turned this way, and he is so deaf that one must shout to him to be heard at all."

"What if he had seen me?" said I eagerly.

"Well, you heard what he said, and since it was good old Jerome, I would have bribed him somehow."

"With kisses?"

"Yes," she answered. "The silly fellow says he loves me, and is continually wanting to know when I will be his wife—and he old enough to be my father!"

There was a look of scornfulness on her face when she said this.

We talked on for a while, she leaving me from time to time to look about outside, and make sure that the way was clear. When she had put the finishing touches to the duke's bed she went away in a hurry, since she would be missed if she lingered much longer.

"Mistress Herslan is an unspeakable termagant when work is in question. I trust she will not know that old Jerome has been here. And, good lack! what if she misses that capon from the larder? I shall have to put it down to the duke's appetite," said she as she tripped away.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE NETHERLANDS IN DANGER

THE day passed wearily, and I saw no more of Katrine until she came in at dusk to set the logs ablaze in the fireplace. Then she left me some food, telling me before she went that everyone thought I had succeeded in getting away, the castle having been searched twice over, high and low.

An hour later a page came in, and having lighted the lamps, he set a couple of chairs before the hearth. He lingered for a time, looking into the fire, on to which he tossed fresh logs, singing meanwhile one of the Catholic songs of France, which no Huguenot would have loved to hear.

"The duke comes, and will have company," I thought to myself, when the young fellow went away, slamming the door after him. He had not been long gone when the door opened again, and two men entered, talking as they came. One was the Duke of Anjou, for he stepped forward quickly, and came within sight. The other had not spoken as yet in my hearing, and since he came in much more leisurely, I did not see him for a few moments.

"Come forward, my Lord Duke," said Anjou, and with the word he rested his hand on one of the chairs, as if he waited for his companion to be seated. The delay was trifling, but when the Duke of Parma stepped forward and sat before the fire he held out his hands, as if he felt the cold. A few minutes of silence followed, for when Anjou sat down the two men gazed into the fire abstractedly, both of them busy with their thoughts, or unwilling to start the conversation.

"We will have some wine brought in," said Anjou, striking the gong heavily, and for the space of time which elapsed before the serving man had laid the wine upon the table the talk was on trifling matters, and mainly concerned the incidents of that day's chase.

"Now let us go to the real business for which we have both come hither," said Anjou, as soon as the door had closed, and they were, as they thought, alone. "I could do nothing with your envoys, Carnero and Acosta."

"They did not understand you, I think," responded Parma, in his sharp, decisive way.

"But I surely spoke plainly enough, my Lord Duke," said Anjou, somewhat testily, I thought. "I told them what I hoped to do, but they treated me somewhat cavalierly, as though they considered my guarantees insufficient."

"Nor do I wonder at their doing so," responded Parma. "You spoke as if you held the Netherlands so well in hand that you had but to issue orders, and the whole thing could be done at once. But is it so? If it should be so, 'tis more than we of Spain have experienced for many a year gone by. Things have gone from bad to worse since Alva so distinctly failed, and I see naught for it, eventually, but evacuation without reserve."

"Unless you and I can come to terms, Parma," interposed the Duke of Anjou impatiently.

"But your guarantees? From what I hear and see, the Prince of Orange is still master of the country——"

"I am sovereign," interrupted Anjou.

"Ha! so it may be. But in this case the prince has the real power, and it is with him, therefore, that we have to reckon."

"'Tis an insult to me to say so, my Lord," said Anjou angrily.

"Nay, my Lord Duke, 'tis truth on my part, for when you want me to make great concessions I must needs have guarantees that are unquestionable, and those you can not give me."

I was listening eagerly in my unsuspected retreat, and there I heard that which set my heart beating as wildly

as it did when Anjou and his courtiers had so basely concocted their conspiracy in his bed chamber at Antwerp.

"But what if I not only give you the guarantees, but give you also ample proof of my ability to do as I say?"

"Then, Anjou, the whole case is altered, and we may debate on more equal terms."

I can not recount the whole of that conversation, although it bore directly on the liberties of the Netherlands. I listened to every word greedily, vowing that when I got away I would do that which would frustrate these plans which revealed the French duke as the personification of perfidy. My countrymen had called him King Stork on the jetty at Flushing. That name had become a by-word throughout the land, and, as I have said, men used it freely when there were no Frenchmen near to resent what they took to be an insult to their royal master. Yet the people did not know one tenth of what he was doing to prove himself the destroyer of our national liberty. The culmination of all came presently, and had it not been for my own desperate condition I could have gone out of my hiding place gladly, and run my sword through one who was proving traitorous beyond all that words can tell, and treating his solemn oaths as though they had never been made.

After a time there came a long pause. Anjou grew restless, and rising from his seat, walked backward and forward across the room. More than once he came so close to where I lay that had I put out my hand I could have caught his foot and thrown him. When he was on the turn to go back again he halted so long that the creaking of the leather of his boots while he restlessly stood by me was plainly heard, as with heel to floor he lifted his toes. A thrust of the sword would have lamed him for life, but it was madness to think of it, and I put the temptation aside regretfully.

"What do you say to this, Parma?" he asked, and the Spanish governor turned in his chair to look at him and listen.

"Say on," said he, when Anjou hesitated.

"I will give you back the chief cities in the Nether-

lands if you will but surrender to me some of the strongholds on the French borders."

"How?" exclaimed the other incredulously.

"Easily enough. On the fifteenth of January it is arranged that my officers, now gathering sufficient forces in the various districts for the purpose, shall make a rush on the leading cities, and establish French garrisons in place of the burgher guards. Arrangements are now being made at such cities——"

"Name some, my Lord, and then I shall know how much your venture is worth," cried Parma, and through the barely opened door I could see the surprised look on his face.

"That were easily done. Vilvoorde, Ostend, Alost, Dendermonde, Bruges, Antwerp——"

"Antwerp! If you can give me Antwerp, my Lord Duke, I am disposed to listen to you."

"I can do that. Yes, and I will!" cried Anjou, stepping forward eagerly. "So far I am master in name, but my soldiers shall hold it, and when you choose to surrender the frontier towns it shall pass into your hands with the others. To tell you the truth, Parma, I am already sick of the country, and since the King of Spain desires it, I see no reason why we should not come to such terms as would please both of us. You want the Netherlands, if I may draw my conclusions from the gallant struggle Spain is making to regain the power she has undoubtedly lost."

He was again tramping to and fro across the chamber with heavy steps, and his evil-looking face seemed to me diabolical, while every gesture betrayed his eagerness. It was easy to see that in a matter of diplomacy he was no match for the subtle Farnese, who was not merely a famous soldier, but an adroit statesman. The look on Parma's face showed that he was aware of this.

"My Lord of Anjou," said he slowly, putting out a hand as if to stay the Frenchman's restless movements, "I think you judge me wrongly in this matter. Be sure of one thing, that I shall do little that will induce his Majesty of Spain to spend much more blood and treasure

on this accursed land. If I could prevail on my royal master to surrender the Netherlands, and suffer those resolute people to go their own way, I would gladly do so, and have greater hope for Spain. As it is, the provinces hang like a millstone about Spain's neck, as many other of her belongings do. What, think you, are our Italian possessions but the prelude to our ruin as an empire? All the wealth of the Indies is insufficient to meet the tremendous war demands, and year by year we are losing ground."

Anjou looked at Parma with knitted brows, clasping the lower part of his face with his left hand, while the right hung listlessly at his side. For a time he did not speak, and there was a hush in the room, no sound being heard but the crackling of some wood in the fire when Parma stirred it, so that the light might better show up the other's face.

"You amaze me, my Lord!" Anjou exclaimed at last. "Why does Spain hold the country so tenaciously if what you say be true?"

"'Tis the king's obstinacy, if you would know the truth, and I may add, as well, his blind loyalty to the Catholic Church, and his supreme desire to serve the Inquisition."

The subtle Farnese had deceived the French duke in this play of diplomacy, or statecraft, or whatever one may choose to call it; and Anjou, being led to suppose that the king valued the land but lightly which he, the Frenchman, was eager to be rid of, made such terms that the Netherlands were to be surrendered as soon as Anjou could throw French garrisons into certain cities which were agreed upon.

When the interview was over, and Parma had quitted the room, I was well-nigh mad with impatience and anxiety. There was that within my ken which, if the prince could know it, would save the country alike from France and Spain; but I was fastened in this castle, cooped up in one small corner of it, bound, as it were, hand and foot. Yet in less than three weeks the cities which were now garrisoned by the burgher guards were to be surprised,

and then the old, intolerable, and murderous tyranny was to be let loose upon the land.

A mad thought came into my mind as I lay in hiding. Anjou flung himself into the chair when he had come back from seeing the Duke of Parma to the door. I had a sword which I well knew how to use. What should hinder me from stealing on the duke and end forever such a worthless yet dangerous life? The world would be better for his absence, and with his death the whole of the Netherlands would revert once more to the prince and the States-General.

I found myself debating the matter keenly, as to how far such an action would be justifiable. Inclination, expediency, and patriotism—all combined to urge me to the deed; and so far was I convinced at last of the legitimacy, nay, of the righteousness of the deed, that I had actually set myself to the task, and was already halfway through the narrow opening, sword in hand, when a loud knock came on the chamber door.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A STRANGE MEETING

THE newcomer brought a message which caused the duke to quit the chamber hurriedly, and when Katrine came later in the evening to bring me some food, she told me that he had ordered his horse and a company of twenty troopers to be in readiness without delay.

"He has just now started, but for what place, or for what reason I do not know," said she, kneeling down at the narrow doorway, as if willing for a chat while I was eating.

Her news of all that was going on set my mind more at ease than it had been for some time, and I was more than gratified when I heard that Parma was to leave the castle at day dawn.

"I think, Master Blomberg, I shall have to kiss that horrid old Jerome into usefulness since we must get you away somehow."

She said this just as she was about to rise to her feet, reluctantly, as I thought. "But I do not like it," she went on. "His horrid, rough chin rasps my face sorely," and she put up her hand to smooth it tenderly, and somewhat ruefully.

"I shall owe you all the more, Katrine," I responded with a pleasant laugh; and so saying, I took her hand and kissed it.

"Nay," said she ingenuously, and pouting. "Have I not some lips? I am not one of your ladies of the court, and do not care for such a kiss as that. 'Tis what the dogs in the yard do every day of my life—give my hand a lick, as much as to say, 'I like you, Katrine!'"

I looked at her, intensely amused in spite of my danger; and kneeling there she looked so pretty, with that pout to lend extra attraction, that I put out my hand, and drawing her toward me, gave her as many as she wanted. God knows she was one of the best friends I had just then in all the world, and stood between me and a fearful fate.

The long stay in my narrow chamber began to grow irksome, and knowing that the duke had gone, and was not likely to occupy the bed chamber that night unless he should return unexpectedly, I thought that I might venture into the outer room. It was a great risk to run, but I braved it, and was about to step out when Katrine came back in haste, scarcely staying more than a moment to say that the duke had ridden forth. She drew the door after her, and when all was quiet I walked in my stockinged feet up and down the spacious apartment, the only light of which was the glowing fire that Katrine said she would keep up for my comfort, but ostensibly in case the duke might come back that night. An hour or two went by, some parts of which I spent in looking out on the terraced garden from my prison window, for such it was in all reality.

The night clouds were massing up from the west and floating past the moon, sometimes throwing the garden into darkness, and then leaving its walls and greenswards, fountains and statues, in the full flood of light until another mass of clouds should come. Standing in hiding among the heavy window hangings I watched eagerly to see whether there was any chance of escape, but the thing seemed impossible. Beyond the garden were the strong thick walls, crowned with battlements, with here and there a mural tower. Had I thrown open the casement and risked the drop into the garden below, I should have been no nearer escape, for the walls were paced by sentinels, whose cries came now and again on the night air, as if to show that they were alert or answering challenges. While I peered through the window a soldier walked up the open flight of narrow steps from the garden to the wall and relieved the sentinel there. My only hope, I thought, when I turned away, was Katrine.

The long silence within the room, and the absence of any sign of danger in the corridor outside, awoke the venturesome spirit. Taking from the wall a sharp Italian dagger, I thrust it into my belt, and then went across to the door, which opened when I lifted the latch. Leaving it ajar for a few moments while I stood among the hangings, I listened intently, but not a sound was to be heard anywhere. The great household was asleep, without a doubt, none stirring but such of the serving men and kitchen wenches who were on night duty, and the soldiers in the guardroom.

Presently I slipped into the corridor, which was almost in absolute darkness, the only light in it being that of the moonbeams which found their way through a window three or four yards to the left. I had no object in view save to wile away the time and relieve my restlessness after such a long confinement in a cooped-up chamber not more than a yard broad and just long enough to enable me to lie full length. Again I listened, bending forward, with a finger to my lips, to know at once whether anyone approached; but all was still, save for a far-distant sound which came and went in a moment—something that was like the noisy burst of laughter in the guardroom at the opening of the door, which closed instantly. It served to give me some idea as to the direction in which my greatest danger lay.

Crossing on tiptoe, I went into the recess and looked out of the window. To the right of an empty courtyard, flanked by thick walls on which a sentry walked, was a high tower. While I gazed the idea occurred to me that if I could but get into one of its chambers, whose window looked out on the open country, I might get away and warn my master. Katrine might help me to a rope, and then liberty was possible.

I was standing all-absorbed, peering into every corner of the courtyard which was lit up fitfully by the broken moonlight, to know as much as could be known, when I was startled by a sound not very far away. Some one had coughed; then came silence, followed by another cough, and this time nearer. Slipping out of my place

into the corridor, I crossed on tiptoe to the duke's bed chamber without being seen or heard, and putting the door together softly, hastened back to my hiding place, where I lay watchful, my heart beating quickly because of the narrow escape I had had. Before many moments had gone there was the click of a latch, and some one entered stealthily.

"Quick," came a whisper, followed by a short pause, the drop of the latch, and after that a well-known call.

"It is I, Master Blomberg," and Katrine came round quickly and soundlessly on the heavy carpet, to the place where I lay.

"I have brought you a visitor," said she, eager and excited, holding her hand to her heart as if to stay the tumult there, because of her daring act.

"A visitor!" I exclaimed in astonishment.

"Yes," was the response; and then she turned, while she was yet on her knees. "But be as quiet as you can. I must be gone to see that the door is safe." So saying, she rose and left me.

She had barely gone when some one appeared at the foot of the bed and halted there, as if looking for me. The glowing fire showed up the figure, and I knew it instantly.

"Peter!" I cried. "In God's name what brought you here?"

"My love for you, dear master," he answered, bounding forward and throwing himself down full length before me to take my hand, which he covered with kisses. "O God, I have found him!" said he, when he desisted, and lifted his face so that he might look into mine, as if to be sure that I was he for whom he had sought and risked so much. "Thank God! thank God!" he said again and again, fondling my hand, as if, having found me, he could not let it go, lest he should lose me once more.

My eyes grew dim at these tokens of his affection, but I felt half dismayed at his presence, since it might hamper my own endeavours to get away.

"What brought you here, Peter?" said I, stroking his hand kindly, now that he suffered it to lie in mine.

"What brought me here? I have already told you—my love for you, and my endeavour to set you free," he answered impulsively.

"You!" I exclaimed, bewildered at the love, and amazed at the simplicity that made the task seem possible.

"Yes, I, dear master," he replied, still looking into my face. "I saw you in the guardroom at Antwerp, and followed you as you rode with the duke through the city. Being fleet of foot I ran across the country, rarely losing sight of you; at last I mounted a horse which I found, and riding behind, saw you go through the gateway of this place. I have watched that gateway night and day, and what is more, I have been in the castle many a time at night, looking into the rooms in search for you."

My amazement grew as he proceeded. His love had made him so venturesome that he risked torture, and I know not what, to find me. All that I could do was to stroke his hand, and more than one tear rolled down my cheeks at the proof of this simple one's devotion.

"But how did you get into the castle? Through the gates?"

"Through the gates?" he exclaimed half scornfully. "Who would let me in at the gate, think you? They would be more likely to flog me, perhaps to hang me, if they did not flay me. Nay, Master Blomberg, not through the gates. How did I get into your room at Antwerp? How did I reach the roofs in Leyden, and find my way to the room you set apart for me? How, but by using hand and foot, and climbing? Listen, and I will tell you. I climbed by a tree till I came to a gargoyle, and from thence I drew myself up until I got to a window, and so into a room which chanced to be empty. Call this a castle, and well defended!" he cried, with contempt in his voice, so loudly that Katrine came back from her place at the door and bade him speak in whispers.

"I will," said he meekly, and looking frightened, lest his indiscretion had betrayed me.

"Since then, dear master, I have looked for you every-

where, even in the dungeon, which I found empty. That served to make me fear that I had missed you, and that you had been taken away while I was not watching at the gate. But this maiden saw me in the larder, whither I had gone, for I was hungry. She was desperately frightened—thought that I was Satan himself, I suppose," he added seriously. "But I implored her to listen, because I had come to find you, and so she brought me here."

He was going on to say more when Katrine crossed the chamber at a run.

"Get into hiding. Some one is coming."

She was gone on the instant, the door of the apartment closed, and Peter and I were alone together.

"Crawl in, and be silent as death if you love your master," said I. "Do not speak nor move, whatever you hear, unless I give you leave."

"I will do aught that you desire," he responded in a whisper, as he came in stealthily and lay in the farther corner, where he remained in silence.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE QUEST FOR CAROLINE

THIS coming of Peter Bakkerzeel was wonderful, and unexpected also, as one may well imagine; but there was something yet more startling in store. It gave the clew to the duke's hasty departure from the castle, but it did far more.

I had drawn the secret door toward me, leaving it slightly ajar, when I heard the voice of Anjou; but what he said I did not catch until he had crossed the floor and stood before the fire.

"'Tis that devil, the duke himself," whispered Peter, who had crawled forward from his corner, and was peering over my shoulder at his Grace, who was beating his spurred boot on the hearth impatiently and angrily.

"Come in and shut the door," he cried, in a tone that showed him to be in a savage mood when, a few minutes later, a loud knock came.

The door went together sharply, with no attempt at stealth, since there was no call for it.

"Where have you put the jade, Straden?"

"In the tower, your Grace, and in the room wherein you intended to lodge Master Blomberg."

"That accursed Fleming!" cried the duke, stamping his boot heavily, and with an oath which was no pleasant thing for one to hear. "Should I find him Mistress Hesselaer shall have no lover save myself, for I will run him up to the nearest elm tree, if I do not have him put out of this world some other way."

"He seems a goodly fellow," remonstrated the officer, "and it were well, I think, to let him alone."

"Straden, you must be mad, or else you have little care for the peril that may come if he be not found," cried Anjou savagely, and with a look upon his face that made the officer step back, as if he feared a blow. The duke's hand, indeed, went up as if to strike, but it stopped midway when Straden clapped a hand upon his sword.

"My Lord, would you dare to strike me?" he exclaimed resolutely. "Though you be my master, I am a man of gentle blood, and I brook no blows, even from your royal hand."

"Mother of God!" cried Anjou with a forced laugh, "these officers of mine must needs be treated as one's equals nowadays."

"Nay, your Grace, not as equals," interrupted the other, "but no man living, not even the king himself, shall strike me. Think you that I, of noble lineage, am like the varlet who holds your stirrup when you mount, or the fellow who dresses you for your bed?"

"Think no more of it. I was over-angry with you," the duke answered hastily, realizing that his temper had carried him too far. Doubtless a servant like Straden was not easily replaced, and if he knew his own worth, and used the privilege of plain speech, the duke knew also that under present circumstances it would be folly to offend him.

The two men relapsed into silence, both staring at the fire moodily, Anjou now and again viciously kicking a log aside. After a while his Grace took to pacing up and down in his old, restless way. Softness, gentleness, kindness, and good will were altogether absent from his face whensoever the light fell on it, and I found myself pitying the poor "jade," as he called her, who had fallen into his hands.

While he tramped backward and forward, Straden looked after him, with a look of contempt upon his face, not seen, however, by the duke, whose eyes were bent upon the ground. Suddenly he pulled up and swung round so as to look at his companion.

"Straden, what said Mistress Hesselaer when she was put into the tower?"

The question nearly drove me mad, and nothing but a supreme effort kept me from rushing out of the place of concealment and striking down the duke where he stood. That would not have served my cause in any way, and if I would effect Caroline's release I should have to bide my time and reckon with Anjou later.

"What did she say, my Lord Duke?" answered Straden scornfully. "What would a pure-minded and high-spirited woman be likely to say? I tell you this, that I will quit your service altogether if you ask me for any further help in such intrigues, especially when such a woman as this one is in question."

"Straden," cried the duke, irritated to madness, "you grow more and more insolent every day."

"'Tis not insolence, but a man's common right to speak when he sees perfidy on the one hand and base intrigue on the other, whereby a good woman is being persecuted."

"Perfidy!"

"Yes, your Grace. Is it not perfidy of the basest sort when you come to this country and promise to abide by the constitution and maintain the cause of the Netherlanders, and yet you are playing into the hands of Spain? God knows I do not love these people, but I love honour, and I can but say—pardon my plainness of speech—I think it unworthy of the Son of France that he should betray the people who have chosen him as sovereign."

"How dare you say that I would betray the people?" cried the duke, curbing his passion.

"I go by what I hear. It is the talk of the soldiers in the guardroom. The lackeys and stablemen whisper about it, and are counting their possible spoils when you shall go yet further and suffer them to indulge in rapine and fury, as Alva was wont to do."

Anjou was about to answer when a page entered and placed a letter in his hands. He tore it open, and reading eagerly, turned round with a curse on his lips, and strode out of the room, leaving Straden and the boy to follow at their leisure.

"He will kill her!" exclaimed Peter, when the door

had slammed together, leaving us once more to ourselves. He was in a frenzy of excitement, which he strove to control, because, with my hand on his, I had whispered to him not to speak or do anything that would betray our presence.

"Nay, Peter, he will keep her prisoner, and it must be our endeavour to release her."

"Ha!" said he. Then he settled down to absolute silence, sitting on the floor, rigid as a block of marble, save that his breath came now and again in quick gasps. I had thrown the little door wide open, so that the blazing firelight poured in and showed up his face plainly. After a time the set features relaxed, the nostrils ceased to dilate, and a look of cunning gleamed from his eyes when he put out a hand and laid it on my shoulder, as if to attract my attention.

"Dear master, we will set her free."

"But how?" said I, not caring to throw any doubt upon his resolution.

"I will watch for her jailer, and after that will do what I can. I must be gone at once, but will come to you again." Before I could hinder him he had scrambled out of our retreat and crossed the room with catlike stealth. There was not a sound save the faintest click of the latch, which told me that he had gone out of the room.

I had little anxiety as to his safety. He was in his element when bent on search that called for secrecy. Many a time he had frustrated the Familiars, and wormed out their secrets with a facility and sureness that astonished me. He had got into dungeons, and had brought out messages from dens which were supposed to be closed forever to all the outside world. It seemed as easy for him to thread his way along dark passages and keep in hiding where others would have been discovered as it was for men to do the most ordinary things in everyday life. Having this in mind I thought but little of his danger, and sat back trying to wile away the weary hours that might pass before his return.

But suppose that the duke should be in bed and asleep

when Peter came back; how could he enter, or how could I venture out to him? There lay the crux of it all, it seemed to me; for, bold as I was, I had scarcely nerve enough to cross that room and risk discovery when so much depended on secrecy. Failure would mean my own death, and what it meant for Caroline when I should be gone it made me mad to think of.

Some time went by, and Peter did not return. As far as I could judge it was eleven o'clock—perhaps later—when the duke came in and prepared for bed, going thither in the vilest temper, and shutting me in meanwhile as in a trap. He had been drinking heavily, I thought, and after a time his heavy breathing convinced me that he was asleep. Time passed, and yet Peter did not return. My impatience grew at last to be so intolerable that I crept out of my hole, and bending down almost to my hands and knees, so as not to be seen if the sleeper should awake, I found my way to the curtains which hung across the door. The heavy breathing went on as before, so that I knew that Anjou slept. Turning the key in the lock, I opened the door and slipped out into the corridor. It was all as when I had ventured out before—in absolute stillness but for the occasional heavy breathing or snoring of some sleeper who had not troubled to shut his door. Such sounds seemed to carry confidence with them, since they showed that there were so many men the less to reckon with.

I lingered at the door, with one hand on the latch and the other ready for dagger-play if I was surprised, for it might be that I could dash across the room and enter my retreat without anyone seeing whither I had gone and how I disappeared. Half an hour passed, and more than once I thrust the door open slightly and drew back the curtains to listen, but each time I was reassured, for the duke still slept. A longing came to go back and thrust my dagger into his heart, so as to have done with him forever, but a second thought brought revolt with it, and the man who was at my mercy lived on.

Suddenly I started and whipped out my dagger, for a figure appeared in the semidarkness within hand reach.

This was certain, however, that no one could see me standing back in the deep doorway, where nothing relieved the blackness. There was a momentary hesitation on the other's part, as if uncertain of his position, but it gave me opportunity to peer at him, and in part to discover his identity. The figure in that half light in which it stood had something familiar about it, and lest mischief might come of the delay, I took the other risk, and spoke in a whisper so soft that other ears less quick would never have heard it.

"Peter."

"Is it Master Blomberg?"

"Yes."

"Then come at once, but softly. I know where the dear mistress is. But first let me go in and kill the duke."

"Nay, Peter, that would spoil all. Let him live on. Enough to-night to find Mistress Hesselaer." So saying, I laid a hand on his arm to draw him away, for with his longing for vengeance he seemed to have lost his usual docility. Only for a moment, however, for he dropped his hand instantly from the latch, and turning with me, moved forward.

"Katrine is at the end of the next corridor, and will show the way," he said, when we quitted that passage off which the duke's room was placed. Then on we went again, with stealthy tread, halting at intervals to listen, and more than once drawing back into a window or a doorway when the tramp of careless feet was heard.

"Katrine," whispered Peter, pulling up so unexpectedly that I nearly tumbled over him, and we made some slight noise while we endeavoured to keep on our feet.

"Here," came the response. "Is your master with you?"

"Yes."

"I know where she is," said the girl, when I felt for her hand and thanked her for her help. That was all we dared do, and then our journey began again. For full ten minutes we halted in one of the corridors, for half a dozen men came tramping down it noisily from the

other end, the jingle of steel telling us as they approached that they were full armed.

"'Tis some of the guard. They will not come past us," Katrine whispered, desiring to set my mind at rest, and drawing back so that no chance gleam of light should betray our presence. The men turned into a room some twenty yards away from where we stood, but left the door wide open, so that we heard the loud talking and banter and swearing usual in every guardroom. That open door was likely to be a hindrance and a peril to us, and we grew restless at the enforced delay, since some one might come our way at any moment.

"I will go down and shut it myself," said the girl, growing impatient; and she was on the move to carry out her purpose when the door closed with a bang.

"Run!" she whispered, going forward herself swiftly, and leaving us to follow as quietly as could be. Peter ran as softly as a cat, there being no sound of a footfall, but my own heavy boots would not enable me to keep pace with them lest the clatter should be heard. I had to content myself with a slower pace on tiptoe, but came before long to the spot where the others were waiting for me.

"Now we will go and get the key," said Katrine, turning down a corridor so dimly lighted that it was little better than in darkness, like those passages we had already traversed. "Do not be frightened," she added half gaily, as if she felt that the greatest danger had been passed by this time. But she said no more until we halted at a door beneath which the light could be seen, showing that the room was likely to contain some one, but whether friend or foe was not within my knowledge. Scarcely a foe, I imagined, for the girl, hitherto so alert and anxious, was now comparatively at ease. She tapped at the door lightly.

"May I come in?" she asked, and waited a moment or two for an answer, which did not come. "Go and stand in yonder doorway," she went on, "lest anyone, should see you when I open the door; but, if you like, you may come in when I call you, as I will do if the way is clear."

Peter and I, now used to the darkness, went down the passage for a few yards, feeling for a doorway, and finding one, stood back so that when the glare of light came streaming out as our guide opened the door we were not visible if any of the castle people chanced to be near. She peeped in. Then I saw her hand go up, and her finger beckoning to us.

Keeping close in by the wall, we slipped into the room after her, and pushed the door behind us, wondering who it was who would give us what we desired.

CHAPTER XXX

THE LADDER IN THE GALE

WHEN we entered the room we saw Katrine's face full of laughter, while she pointed to some one seated before the fire, with his chin on his chest, and snoring heavily. On the table close by stood a tankard, and the girl, shrugging her shoulders, told the whole story in one word:

"Drugged."

I looked at the white-haired sleeper, and saw that he was Marot, the old man who had acted as my guide to the tower room which had been meant for my prison. But while I stared at him in no small astonishment, realizing while I did so how effectively our pretty friend had served us, she was rifling the old man's doublet, and presently drew forth a key, which she held up in triumph while she skipped across the floor gaily.

"Come. He will sleep for hours yet, but let us not linger," said she, taking up a candle and some tinder, then blowing out the lamp, so that no one should see us quit the room. "Take my hand, Master Blomberg.—But shut the door, Peter," she added when we stepped out into the passage. "We are close to the steps by which we mount the tower."

She walked with me, her hand in mine, bidding me feel my way on the left, for it was difficult in the darkness to tell where we were going. Less than twenty yards away from the door the steps began, and, heedless of their number, and eager in our quest, we mounted them quickly and with little caution, because, as Katrine said, Marot had told her that none of the rooms in the tower were occupied, save that in which the duke's prisoner lay. Yet

we made no unnecessary noise, but went up and up, persistently, not even staying to take breath, as poor old Marot and the trooper had done during my own first journey. To us, eager and anxious, the climb was a quick one, and before long we stood outside the door, waiting for Katrine to put the key into the lock.

My heart was beating with anticipation, and I scarcely knew how to wait while our guide was removing the only barrier between my loved one and myself.

"Be patient," said Katrine, somewhat petulantly, when I bade her hasten. "See! the lock goes heavily, and my hand is not strong enough."

In a moment I had taken the key in my own grip, and gave it the required twist. Peter's hand was already on the latch, and when he heard the bolt shoot back he thrust the door wide open.

"Caroline," said I, not staying to think that some might hear me, "are you there?"

There was the rustle of a woman's dress, a gasp, half of astonishment and half of fear, and then an answering voice. Oh, I knew it well. I would have sworn to it among ten thousand, for love is keen to discriminate. No need to see her face, for when the answer came—"Bertrand! Oh, is it really you, my love?"—I was at her side and on my knees. Prisoner though she was, and I no better in a sense, and time so precious, and life for some of us, and honour for one, hanging by a single thread that might snap at any moment, I flung my arms about her, while she did the same to me. We kissed each other, heedless of those who stood close by. Heedless, did I say? Why should we heed when death, and worse than death, had threatened to separate us forever? Ah, it was like being in heaven to have her breath upon my cheeks, to hear her whisper her love, and thank me again and again for having remembered her.

But love must not always laugh at danger, nor would Katrine suffer us to linger. She spoke almost brusquely, and bade us come without delay, unless we cared for kisses more than safety. The laughter had gone out of her voice, but it was not fear which took its place. I

thought, as I stood on my feet, and, throwing my arms about my loved one's waist, lifted her from her prison bed, that there was a touch of jealousy in the tone. Then I remembered how she had cared for my kisses on her own lips rather than on her hand. The girl had done us noble service, and had unwittingly unfolded her own secret to me.

"Pardon us, Katrine," said I gently. "We forgot ourselves in our joy at meeting. But what is next?"

"Follow me. Peter not only first found out where your mistress was, but knows how to get you from the tower. Perhaps I know the way, however, better than he does."

The sharpness in her voice was all gone, and what jealousy had sprung up at first had been crushed down. The girl was all eagerness again to see us safely away.

We had not got to the bottom of her kindness, however, for when we had descended many stairs and had come, indeed, within a dozen steps of the corridor where old Marot was yet sleeping heavily, and snoring so lustily that we could hear him, she halted, threw open a door, and bade us enter quickly.

"Hurry, in Heaven's name!" she whispered, fairly pushing us in. "Some one is coming.

A heavy tramp could be heard, as of two men approaching, and then loud voices, for those who came had not any need of stealth like us. Katrine stood with the door ajar, listening eagerly. She would have closed and bolted it, but there was nothing inside by which it could be fastened. For the time we stood at the mercy of any who chose to enter this chamber.

A light found its way through at the bottom of the door, and the heavy scuff of feet upon the stone steps followed. The men were mounting the tower stairs, and all we could do was to pray that they might pass by and leave us undiscovered.

"These doors ought all to be bolted on the outside, Jules," said one of the men who halted outside. It was a startling moment for us all.

The night was dark and stormy. We could hear the

wind roaring wildly among the leafless branches of the trees, and the rain beating furiously against the glass of the window in gusts which promised a wretched journey if we succeeded in making our escape. But what was such a prospect as that compared to our present suspense? Peter was breathing hard, and I heard the faint scrape of steel, which told me that the dagger he carried at his belt was now in hand, in readiness to plunge into the breast of any who would seek to hinder our escape. For me, I was like him—ready to bring down the weapon I held the moment anyone should enter. This was in all reality facing death, shut up to it, as it were, with no escape except by sacrificing some one else. I was so resolute to save Caroline that I would have struck down any man rather than suffer her to fall into Anjou's hands—that debauchee and libertine.

The men lingered, neither attempting to ascend the steps nor enter the chamber where we waited, and thus they added to our anxiety, turning it into torture. Time was evidently of no value to them, for they stood outside, talking about various things, and laughing at jests so coarse that my face and ears burned at the thought that Caroline and Katrine should hear them. And all that time we were enduring the most fearful suspense. Can one imagine the feelings of a man condemned, already standing at the gallows, but made to wait to see whether a reprieve would come? to see, perhaps, a rider coming across the distant polder, presently to burst through an opening crowd, yet not sure that the message would mean life—that it was as likely to give the word for death? That is suspense, so far as I can think it, of the severest sort; and it was that sort of suspense we endured while those men waited outside.

The end came when the two maidens were well-nigh worn out. Already Caroline had sunk to the floor, and poor Katrine was leaning against the wall, with her face buried in her hands, as if she would stifle a cry which threatened to burst from her lips against her will.

"Keep up, brave heart," said I to Caroline. "Re-

member what you did in the forest when you braved the Familiars."

"Then, Bertrand," she whispered, but with a catch in the words, "then, Bertrand, it was all action. I had something to do. But this waiting is terrible. Would to God they would come in or go away!"

She was yet speaking when one of the men outside exclaimed:

"Thrust in the bolt, Jules, and let us move on. What say you? I care not for all those steps, and old Marot may be trusted to look well after my Lord Duke's lady. Shall we let it pass as all right, and go on elsewhere?"

Jules's answer was a vigorous curse on the steps and on the fellow who, a few days before, had made him know to his sorrow how hard they were. Then came the scream of the shooting bolt, the sound of the tramp down the steps, and the noisy journey along the corridor below.

"Now, Peter," said I, thrusting back the dagger into my belt, "how do you think we shall get away, now that they have bolted us in?"

The sound of the bolt seemed like death to our hopes, for we were imprisoned now, with no way of escape but by the window.

"Ha!" said he, in no sense distressed, but rather as one who thought that things were going well. "'Tis through the window we must needs go."

"But how?" I asked, astonished. I had half thought that our plan would be to run the risk of a return along the corridors to the duke's sleeping chamber, to remain in hiding in that secret place until we could devise escape from the castle. While I asked how the window could serve us I ran to it and looked into the blackness, seeing nothing. The casement rattled before the furious gusts, and when I loosened the fastening it came back with a noisy clatter, and was well-nigh shattered as it dashed against the wall which formed a part of the deep and wedge-shaped recess. Heedless of the wind, I clambered up and sought to find out how far below the ground was, but seeing nothing, turned away discouraged.

"See, master," said Peter, almost drawing me away

from the place. "Time is precious, but here is a rope ladder. I found it in the armoury, flung down with a heap of rubbish, and 'twill serve our purpose. I came in hither when I went by two hours ago, and the end is already fastened securely, so that we may pass down to the open country."

"'Twas a clever thought," I exclaimed, and he, more than repaid by my word of praise, almost danced with delight. "But can you venture on it, Caroline?"

"Try me, Bertrand. But what of poor Katrine? She did not mean to go, I suppose?"

"I did not, mistress," answered the girl, "but now I must, else, if they found me here and knew that you were gone, they would throw me into the dungeon, which would be as bad as hell, I wot. But let us go, for time presses. In less than an hour those men will be here again."

By now Peter, no more mad at this juncture than any one of us, had seen to the knots, and had flung out the ladder so that it was flying and flapping in the wind.

"I will go down first and hold it fast," he said. "When I get to the bottom you shall hear an owl hoot; then follow."

While he spoke he scrambled through the opening, and feeling cautiously, went down slowly, step by step, having to hold on with one hand, while with the other he felt for the step which was leaping about wildly in the gale. Several minutes passed before I felt the strain caused by his weight lessen somewhat, but the ladder did not toss and plunge, since he was holding to it with a frenzied grip. The owl's hoot came, broken by the windy gusts, but it was what we wanted. While he went down slowly, I had felt about the floor, and Katrine, too, for she said she had once seen a rope somewhere in the room, and it might yet be there.

"I have it," she exclaimed, and coming to me, she placed it in my hands. "You can tie it about the lady's body, so that she may not fall, while you and I will stand here and hold it fast."

"'Tis kind," said Caroline, kissing the maiden. "But why not go first yourself?"

"Nay, lady, I will not."

Before long Caroline was going down into the darkness, and for some while after she was lost to sight the strain alike on rope and ladder lasted; but presently it slackened, and the hoot was once more heard. When I was tying the rope about Katrine I thanked her for all her service, and told her that I wondered how I should ever repay her.

"Ah, Master Blomberg, I want no payment. If I asked for what I would have you would despise me. Fool that I am to look on such as you and dare to love you! I could not help it! Oh, I could not help it! Give me one kiss—just one. I have risked my life for you; yet give me that, and I will never ask again, nay, though I should live my whole life long with you and your beautiful lady."

The girl's voice, into which there had come a sort of hopelessness, broke, and she sobbed while I tightened up the last knot.

"One kiss, Katrine? Nay, a dozen if you will, since but for you I had been dead by now." And I gave her what she desired—poor payment for such service.

"Forgive my boldness," she said, as I held her shoulders while she clambered through the window and felt for the ladder, the wind blowing her hair over her, and nearly tossing her into midair, so fierce was the rush just then.

"Nay, do not call it boldness. Where should I have been but for you?"

"God only knows," she answered earnestly, and then she was gone.

My own turn came at last, and not a moment too soon. It was almost too late. Even while Katrine's going yet put a strain upon the ladder, I heard the sound of voices, and the tramp of feet close to the door of the chamber in which I was standing. The hoot came from below, and glancing behind I saw a line of light beneath the door. Despair almost took possession of me when, in a mo-

mentary lull of the tempest, I heard the bolt shoot back.

"The rope is there, I tell you," said one man testily. "I flung it there some time ago, and no one has used it since."

What else was said in all the uproar of the tempest that followed I do not know, for I had scrambled through the window in hot haste, feeling about with my feet for the ladder steps. As I passed down I saw the door open, and the light for one moment lit up the place; then, thank God! it went clean out. The gust which blew past me into the narrow opening sent the door against the jambs, but what chanced after that I do not know, save this—that I went down the ladder wildly, and landed safely on the ground below.

CHAPTER XXXI

ACROSS THE MARSH

"THIS way," cried Peter, snatching at Katrine's hand, leaving me to follow with Caroline.

We plunged on and on in the dark night, none of us, except our leader, knowing whither we were going. Fortunately the way was level—a grass-covered polder—and we went on hand in hand, one falling now and again on the treacherous, soddened ground, beaten by the driving wind, and soaked to the skin with the rain which poured down in a deluge. Sometimes Peter stopped to make sure that we were keeping pace with him, and once I asked whither he was taking us.

"Have no fear. It shall be where no duke can ever find you. One mile, not more, and you shall all be safe. Trust me, dear master." And on he hastened, bidding us keep up with him.

But short as a mile may seem when all the conditions for travelling are favourable, it was long and trying to us in that fearful night. On leaving the polder the way led through marsh land, and we were frequently splashing in pools of water which rose above our knees. More than once I found myself sinking in the swampy soil up to my waist, glad to have a hand from Caroline, who, coming behind me, was able to avoid the pitfalls into which I tumbled.

To add to our discomfiture, we saw a company of horsemen coming across the polder with torches flaring in the wind, and occasionally heard their shouts while they rode on. They surely could not tell where we were, but were riding anywhere and everywhere, in the hope of

coming across us. Now and again they turned aside, sometimes to right, then to left, the horses galloping madly through the night. Farther away still we saw another party, which, like this one nearest to us, divided up into twos and threes, the better to scour the wind-driven rain-swept fields. Three or four horsemen made a bold dash straight on the point where we were plodding along and tumbling into the mire; but when the horses plunged into the marsh land their riders turned them round and spurred back to solid ground again.

They halted for a few moments, and we could hear a broken sentence here and there, but judged from what the men were saying that they had no hope of finding us in such a place.

"If those who rescued the lady knew the country, they would never come here. They would make for the forest. Turn back, my men, and we will try elsewhere."

Some of these words were lost to us in the tempest, but we heard enough to understand. Our real fear as the horsemen looked around was that the flaring torch lights might chance to show up that part of the marsh where we were huddled together for a moment on a bit of solid ground. It seemed to me, when I looked behind, that the torches threw our shadows on the black patches of water and soil. Possibly it was fancy.

"Come," said Peter. "Katrine, hold Master Blomberg's hand and mine, and he will hold Mistress Hesselaer's. Step warily. Put down your feet firmly, and turn to right or left as I give the word."

This sort of thing lasted for a full hour, and we went on at a snail's pace, wet to the skin in the driving rain, which, now and again, came down in such a rush that the water streamed down our faces, and poured off at every corner of our clothing. How the torches of the horsemen lived in such a downpour I can not imagine, nor is it less of a mystery to me how Peter found his way across the marsh. Whether it was knowledge or instinct I can not tell, but he never seemed to hesitate. His real care was to find a solid spot for our feet, so that Caroline and the maid should not be immersed in

some deep pool. By himself he would have gone forward at double the pace, but he had three others to pilot, and the conditions were all against speed. Yet it meant safety for us, since the horses of our pursuers would not venture thither. We could see, when we occasionally halted, that they were not coming in our direction. The torches were growing fewer and more distant; some were unable to live out the storm and were extinguished; but such as remained sufficed to tell us that the pursuit was being carried on elsewhere.

"Now for solid ground," cried Peter, after we had waded through a stretch of water some fifty yards across, and so deep that I lifted Caroline in my arms to save her from it, since it was fully up to my own waist. Peter laid hold of my doublet, and gave me a pull which enabled me to land on the soddened grass where he was standing.

"You are very wet, mistress," said he, feeling Caroline's shoulders when I had set her on her feet. "And you, also, Master Blomberg. But never mind. A quarter of a mile from here we shall find a hiding place which none of the duke's minions will know of. Ha! look!"

Half a dozen torches were blazing in the wind. They were held by horsemen who had just come from behind a hillock, and were now riding in extended form across the level. If they kept the course they were now taking the outside horseman would ride us down, and there would be nothing for it but to plunge back into the marsh again. And this we had to do. There was no time to pick up Caroline. The horse's hoofs were falling with heavy thud upon the soft ground, and the rider was holding him in a straight course for our halting place. He was fifty yards away when a fearful gust of wind burst by, the flame was beaten down the torch sides, tried to recover itself, then went clean out. But the horse did not pause.

"Back!" exclaimed Peter, and without hesitation we hurried into the waters, slipping, sliding, and swimming, in our hurry to clear out of the way of the oncoming charger.

The water was breast high for Caroline and Katrine when the horseman swung past the spot where we had

just before been standing. Suddenly the animal's hoofs slipped from under him and he fell headlong, tossing the rider full into the pool. The waters splashed into our faces as his body tumbled in not more than a couple of yards away from us, and when he scrambled to his feet, spluttering and swearing at his mishap, and cursing the duke for a mad chase after a girl who had a right to her liberty, he made for the grass again, where his horse was standing. We could dimly see the creature in the darkness, to which we had grown accustomed, and the form of the soldier himself, as he splashed on toward it. Then, having mounted, and gathering up his reins, the fellow turned round to journey homeward, swearing that he would not go another yard that night for all the dukes in the world.

"'Twas poor old Jerome," said Katrine, her teeth chattering with the cold. "He would not have troubled us, so long as I could have said a word in his ear."

Without waiting for him to ride more than a yard or two, we hastened out of the waters and followed Peter, who led the way across another polder for a quarter of a mile. Then we halted among a little group of trees, while Peter, saying he would not be long, disappeared. He was away ten minutes, perhaps, and the two girls, huddling about me for warmth, shivered as the rain invaded our place of shelter with every fresh gust of wind.

"Come," said he on his return, and we were on the move instantly. He led us to a bunch of brushwood which lay at the foot of the hillock from behind which the horsemen had come. Looking cautiously round, to assure himself that no one was observing us, he crawled along a rocky passage, at the end of which a woman knelt, holding a candle in one hand, and shielding it from the wind with the other. The light fell on her face, and we saw how good-natured it was, so that there was no hesitation when we went in on hands and knees. The passage was some three yards long, but not more than high enough to go in thus, and a yard wide, or thereabouts. When the others had passed in I crawled after them, and presently

we were standing in a big chamber whose rocky sides showed that we were in the very bowels of the hill itself.*

"Go and fasten up the front, Peter," said the woman, and while our guide crawled back to do as he was bidden she looked us up and down.

"My poor children, you are soaked through and through. Come hither without delay, and get yourselves dry."

She began to move while she spoke, and led the way up and down steps and along passages, until we came to an open cave where a fire blazed and crackled.

"John!" cried she, leaving us to walk across the floor to warm ourselves.

"Yes?" came the answer, and at that moment a stalwart Fleming appeared at what looked like the doorway of another chamber.

"They are come."

"Then they are welcome," said the man, tossing down a bundle of firewood, and coming forward to greet us. He halted and looked at us with some concern when he saw our bedraggled condition.

"They are wet to the skin, Isabel," he exclaimed, looking at his wife.

"They are. Kindle a fire in yonder chamber instantly, so that Peter and this gentleman may dry themselves, and this fire shall serve for these poor girls. Now, Peter, get you gone with your master, as you call him, into yonder place, and stay there until I call you. I'll bring you each a change of clothing in a few minutes, provided you do not stand particular, sir, as to what you wear?" she added inquiringly, and looking me in the face.

"I care not, my good friend, what it is so that we may get warm again."

She nodded her head good-naturedly, and waited for us to be gone. We followed John Roston into the inner

* Belgium abounds with caverns, now famous by reason of the discovery in them of prehistoric remains, proving beyond a doubt that they were the homes of prehistoric men. These caves are now occupied by peasants.

chamber, where before long a fire roared. I never felt the comfort of dry clothes as I did that night, and when we were called out half an hour later our hostess had some soup steaming on the rough table, which she had drawn to the fire. The two girls, now at ease and feeling secure, laughed at our peasant's garb, but we turned the tables on them when we pointed to the capacious garments which buxom Mistress Roston was wont to use. Tired though we were, and hungry, we stopped at times, with our wooden spoons halfway to our mouths, to criticise each other, and ask what the Countess of Schwartzburg would say if she could see us thus.

The cavern rang with laughter, and as for Peter, he sang until he gave up from sheer weariness, declaring that he could not keep his eyes open any longer. He flung himself on the hearth while saying so, and was snoring loudly in a few minutes.

CHAPTER XXXII

A NIGHT JOURNEY

PETER seemed lively enough when I awoke in the morning, for I found him just entering the chamber with wet and muddy boots, and humming a song, as was his wont when in good spirits.

"We must wait a while in hiding, master," said he cheerily. "The duke's men seem to be everywhere. One horseman was riding by when I peeped out, and it must have been Jerome, for he looked sullen enough, as if his ducking during the night had damped his spirits. He rode on without looking to right or left, and as good fortune had it, his horse was as blind as he. He wandered on to the edge of the marsh, slipped, and fell, and gave himself and his rider a bath whence the soldier came up swearing."

The fun of the thing made Peter dance and sing, until Mistress Roston came and bade him be silent, since, if he was wakeful, there were others who wanted sleep.

"Ay, mistress, I forgot," said he, his face all laughter. "Come here, and I will whisper what I have just seen. 'Tis enough to make a cat laugh." Crossing to her side he whispered in her ears. She laughed aloud, for he told the story with such glee, capering between whiles, slapping his thighs, and holding his sides when he swung round, half double with silent laughter. When Mistress Roston laughed he clapped his hand to her mouth, and motioned to her to be silent, pointing over his shoulder with his thumb, as if to remind her that there were sleepers who must not be disturbed. That made her laugh the more, so that the mischief she had sought to

guard against was done, and before long Caroline and Katrine were with us, apparently none the worse for their night's adventures.

We had to stay in hiding for several days, for both Peter and Roston brought in word, whenever they went to spy out the land, that it would be madness to attempt to escape. Roston himself had gone boldly to the castle, where he had friends, and while there heard that the duke had left orders that the country should be scoured, if needs be for a week to come, night and day, in the hope of finding Caroline and Katrine, who was believed to have aided her in her escape, for there was no suspicion whatever, so far as he could judge, of my having been concerned in it.

Peter went out repeatedly to see how the land lay for my own escape, if Caroline could not be got away. For now the thought was with me, night and day, of that conspiracy between the two dukes, and I was eager to find the prince, to tell him of what was contemplated. It was the country's last chance of escaping irretrievable ruin.

The news that Peter brought disheartened me completely. The country seemed to be alive with Spanish soldiers. They were met with on every road; they were crowding every inn; guns and ammunition wagons were everywhere; bodies of cavalry rode across the ploughed fields in all directions, heedless of the havoc they wrought, and the ruin to the yeomen; the quietest lane appeared to be infested with Parma's soldiers, who were undoubtedly waiting to receive the word to advance on the cities agreed upon by their leader in his interview with Anjou.

Apparently we were safe enough in this cavern, and had it not been for the mischief which threatened the Netherlands, I could not have conceived a happier imprisonment, shut up with Caroline. But, under the circumstances, to have remained in the Rostons' abode would have been treacherous dealing with the prince; it would have indicated a disgraceful lack of patriotism. As the days went on it became a fixed resolve with me that I must risk everything in making an attempt to get away,

and when I told Caroline she did not try to dissuade me. Indeed, she declared it to be my duty. Yet her face was grave, and her lips trembled when she said so.

"'Tis country first, and then ourselves, Bertrand," she observed, her hand resting on my own. "Do you remember what Horace said once?"

"No," I answered. She was a scholarly girl, so that it was naught to wonder at that she should know what that old poet said. As for me, I might have known, but I had no great love for diving into the sayings of poets dead and gone, especially when my Latin had grown very rusty.

"He said: 'It is sweet and glorious to die for one's country.'"

"But I have no wish to die," said I gloomily, half disappointed that she did not tell me to stay, and excuse my staying on the ground of danger.

"Nor have I," responded Caroline. "Yet one has to set all selfish feeling aside, and think of the happiness of the thousands of our countrymen, Bertrand."

I knew this well enough, but a spirit of selfishness was creeping over me when it came to decision between the girl I loved and my country. My individual interests were much to me, yet it came to this, as a positive duty asserting itself, that I had no alternative but to let my own interests slide into abeyance, because the happiness of millions was at stake. I could but feel that it was imperative to run all risks and tell the prince.

I decided to go that night, for the fatal fifteenth of January was but a few days off. When Peter heard that I was about to start he wanted to go with me, but I told him that the best service he could render was to guard his mistress night and day, and see that she came to no harm. The commission so delighted him that he thereupon armed himself with whatever came to hand, and stood on sentry at the entrance to the cavern.

"When you come back, Master Blomberg, you will find her safe, if I am alive," said he bravely, as I shook his hand and bade him farewell.

Roston was my guide when I sallied forth, and fol-

lowing his lead, I threaded my way through the marsh lands until he put me into the beaten road, telling me the names of some at whose cottages I might call for food and lodging. While we stood together on the brow of a hill, we looked ahead, and saw the watchfires of the Spanish camp. The white tents were gathered about a village whose people were to be pitied if they were yet alive. There was all the appearance of a mighty army, with horses picketed by hundreds, sentries dotted about far and near, cannon standing in readiness, bodies of cavalry moving on the outskirts to watch for the approach of danger. In the portion of the camp which was nearest to us we could see men at the tent doors, or standing about the fires getting warmth, for the night was cold.

"You will do well to avoid that, Master Blomberg," said my companion, when he turned to leave me. "Skirt yonder hill, leaving it to your right, and that will screen you from the army and give you some open country. Farewell. God send you a safe journey, and bring you back to Mistress Hesselaer again."

When he was gone I lost no time in going forward. To the left, a mile away, lay a dark mass which I supposed to be a wood, and I made for it, thinking it was scarcely likely that any of Parma's soldiers would be there. Since the trees were bare of foliage in this winter season, I expected to be able to find my way north by the aid of the stars, which were shining brightly overhead. I was not long in getting within the shelter of this bit of forest land. Everything was silent save such night birds as were there. If any four-footed beasts haunted the place they were cowed by the nearness of such a large body of men, and perhaps had slunk away into hiding until such time as the forest should be free again from any but the ordinary passers-by.

It was intensely dark among the trees. One could scarcely see a hand before him, and but for the stars there was nothing to guide one's self by. The ground, too, was soft, so that my feet fell noiselessly. I was hurrying on, taking my chance of knocking against the trees, and holding out my hands to save myself if any came in my

way. Unexpectedly a hand fell on my shoulder, and some one shouted in my ear a summons to surrender.

My answer was a quick swing round, a swift blow with my fist, a wrench from this Spaniard's grasp, and a swift bound forward. Even now I was not free. I was dashing onward, taking my chance, not knowing whether I was going north, south, east, or west, only anxious to get away from the spot toward which several shouting soldiers were hastening, trusting to set myself right presently by the stars, when I came full tilt into some one. There was a Spanish expletive, something of the same sort from myself, and the stranger and I tumbled in a heap. I chanced to be first on my feet, felt the fellow about to rise, gave him a thrust with my foot, sending him sprawling, and bounded off as blindly as before. I have laughed about it since, whenever I have called to mind the yell of astonishment when the man felt my heavy boot shooting him forward into darkness, but it was no laughing matter then.

The forest seemed alive with shouts, and it was at great risk that I went forward, for armed men were coming in all directions, thinking that the alarm indicated a night attack. Sometimes they came so near that they brushed past me, but since I shouted with them in Spanish I got off without further mischief.

Presently a body of footmen passed with blazing torches. I got behind a tree and watched them go by, their arms gleaming in the flaring lights. At their head went the officer whom I had a grudge against for that night attack in the streets of Brussels. There was no love lost on either side, and I could not help wishing that I could have had him to myself for a little time. But that was a pleasure to be foregone. It was now my business to get out of this present danger, and I slipped away.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE FAMILIARS' POOL

When I left Caroline, and set forth on that journey through a country which was practically a great camp, I was well aware that I should have deadly dangers to face, but I had not expected such an experience as that which overtook me after I got clear away from the forest.

I no longer had the stars to guide me, for they were hidden behind the clouds. However, I had no great anxiety on this point, for I had my back on the camp now, and had found my way into a road which I thought led due north. Being still fresh and vigorous, I pushed on sturdily, so as to put as much distance between me and the army as possible before the moon should rise. I pursued the journey heedless of the pools of mud and water which lay at every step. It was no time to think of picking one's way, and on I pressed, intent on self-preservation on the one hand, and on giving timely warning to the prince on the other. I began, indeed, to think that my perils were practically over, and that if I could find shelter in the daytime I could travel during the night, and soon be with the Prince of Orange.

But my thoughts were broken in upon by the sounds of an approaching body of horsemen. They were soldiers, as one could tell by the jingling of the harness and armour; and they were Spaniards without a doubt, since the men were singing Spanish songs which no Flemish patriot would put tongue to. And as for the Frenchmen, whatever agreement the Duke of Anjou might make with Parma, they hated the Spaniards as soundly as any citizen of the Netherlands.

I stood still and wondered what I should do. I was loath to go back, and as for hiding in the bushes which lined the road, that was unsafe, for there were many torches blazing, so that the riders would have seen me as they passed. The only thing that I could do was to break through the bush and hide on the other side. This I did, and found myself completely hidden and able to go forward, regardless of the proximity of the soldiers, whose shouts, while the ribald song proceeded, covered every possible sound which my boots made as they went into the slush and mire.

It was hard work walking thus, and when the troops had gone by and left the road clear, I sought for an opening so as to get into the highway once more. This took off my attention completely from the ground on which I was travelling. Unexpectedly my feet slipped from under me, and I shot downward on a wet slope at a tremendous pace. There was nothing to grasp at in the descent. The rains had soddened everything, and the grass, if there was such, was now like ice, so that I slid down with a speed which bewildered me. Then came a splash, and I found myself shooting downward into icy-cold waters, which closed over me. Not knowing what had chanced, but feeling that I was in danger of death by drowning, I struck out boldly, and rose to the surface. There I looked about me, but all was so black that I saw nothing save the banks, which rose on all sides. When I got to the water's edge I found it treacherous, slippery as any ooze could be, and there was nothing that would serve to give me foothold, so as to scramble away. Keeping a hand on the slimy bank I moved along, treading on mud which gave beneath my feet, feeling as I went for any break in the steep sides, but finding none.

How far I had gone I do not know. Down in the darkness I could never tell whether I was coming again and again to the same spot or not in my search. Overhead was the black sky, and nothing to indicate how far above me was the spot whence I had begun to slide. I dug my fingers into the soft bank to maintain my footing, for my feet slid from beneath me continually, plunging me

again and again into the water, which was chilling me. One would have thought that having been in the dark so long I might have been able to see something of what was round me; but the darkness was that of the infernal Styx, and its waters were as cold, perhaps as venomous, for aught that I could tell.

Presently another horror was added to what I was already enduring. My feet suddenly slid from under me, and I shot back into the deep waters, where I floundered again. In striking out to regain the edge of this dreadful pool my hand came against something. I felt a human face, hairless and smooth. Lower still was the bare bosom of a woman, cold and dead. Yet again I felt the naked arms and then the hands, which were bound tightly together at the wrists. My head swam with horror, and I dashed away from this awful companionship, reaching the side of the pool once more.

There ought to have been a moon by this time, but instead of sending down some light into this death-trap it was clouded over densely. I had my face uplifted, my eyes straining so as to get some sort of glimpse of what this place was like, when a splash of rain fell on my cheek. It was followed by another; then more came into the pool, where it splashed with such vigour that the air seemed full of the sound of falling water. The rain came down pitilessly, and added to my misery, since it seemed to accentuate my hopelessness and the horror of the place. It made me feel that everything was against me. It did not come in fits and starts, but poured down monotonously. How long it lasted I do not know—half an hour, perhaps, and then it stopped.

By that time I was chilled to the bone. I did not seem to have the will to lift a foot or raise a hand to find another holding place. Yet I knew that if I did not I should sink back into the waters and die, just as my dead companion had done. Why not try how far it was possible to crawl by digging my fingers into the bank, and so rise, hand over hand?

Desperation gave me strength—when once I had broken through that feeling of lethargy and numbness—

to drive my fingers deep into the softened soil. I kicked against the sides also, and got some sort of foothold; then rose a foot. I did it again from this bit of vantage ground, and rose still more. And so, by painful degrees, but all the time in fear of slipping downward, I drew my feet at last clear of the water, and held on thus by hands and toes. Up and up I climbed in this weary way, travelling three or four times my height, perhaps, in the course of an hour, and gaining some warmth with the exertion. But even then I began to despair of getting away, for at any moment the foothold might fail me, and all the toil would go for naught, since I should be plunged into the waters again.

All unexpectedly I felt what seemed to be a tree root. I caught hold of it eagerly, and found that when I laid my weight upon it it did not give. By a vigorous pull I raised myself so that my knees rested on this, and I was enabled to feel about for something else that would raise me still more.

It was there—another root, and yet another; and presently my arm was about a tree trunk rising high into the air. Going round the tree cautiously, to place it between me and that awful descent, I felt around with my feet, and found that there was flat ground as far as I could reach. That caused me to go down on my hands and knees, and as I went along I realized that the ground was extending ahead of me, but how far I could not tell. Standing again, and drawing the sword from its scabbard, I used it to feel my way, groping as a blind man does with his staff, and so passed on, leaving that death trap behind.

I may have gone on some hundreds of yards in this manner when I saw a light in the distance. It meant that I was near to living men, and it was welcome after that terrible experience through which I had been passing. I had no thought, however, of blindly running into danger, wet and wretched though I was. The light might be in a cottage, and the owner might gladly play the part of "good Samaritan"; but who could tell? The chances were just as many the other way. However, I resolved to go forward and judge from closer acquaint-

ance what likelihood there was of shelter, for, chilled like this, I had little heart left to plod on in the dark, and especially under a starless sky, with nothing to serve as guide.

When I approached more nearly, I saw that the light came from a doorway, and it was easy to see, when I drew nearer yet, that it was a country inn. Coming to a small group of trees on the opposite side of the road to that on which the hostelry stood, I could look along the empty passage, and glancing to right and left, and finding that there were no travellers about, I took all risks, crossed to the door, and called for the landlord. Some one came out of the kitchen—a bright, round-faced, stout little fellow, of five-and-forty, or thereabouts, a thoroughgoing, typical Dutch landlord. The glimpse I had of the kitchen showed that it was scrupulously clean, which in the Netherlands is nothing to talk about, since all are as great enemies to dirt as the best of their neighbours.

The fact that the man who greeted me was a Dutchman served to reassure me. He looked me up and down, glancing, as I thought, somewhat ruefully at my muddy boots and soddened clothing, which, when I looked down at it, was mud from top to toe. The door opened once more, and out came a bare-armed servant maid, who, when she saw me, threw up her hands in amazement, as if she had never seen one so woe-begone before.

"Where have you been?" she cried. As for the landlord, my appearance seemed to have struck him dumb.

"Let me get somewhere to dry my clothing, and I will tell you," I answered, my teeth chattering with the cold, the garments hanging close to every limb, and clogging my movements.

"Run, Mary, and stir up the blue-room fire," said the landlord genially, when he had found his tongue. "The poor gentleman must have tumbled into the Grachten.* Follow her, master, and I will bring you towels and some warm clothing which will serve you while your own are drying."

* A Grachten is the name given by the Netherlanders to a canal.

"But the mud," said I, looking at the spotless stairs up which Mary tripped, and then pointing to my mud-caked boots.

"Well, toss them off. See, I will help you." And while I leaned against the wall and held up my foot, the little landlord pulled off one, and presently the other also was dangling in his hand.

"Some mulled wine, landlord," said I, with one wet-stockinged foot on the first step.

"I will bring you something that will warm you through and through," and off he started, slamming the kitchen door behind him.

I do not think a room ever looked so comfortable as that into which I entered. The maiden was piling on the fuel, and the flames were roaring up the chimney. The firelight played on the walls and the bed furniture, making the shadows dance merrily. The walls were hung with pictures of doubtful quality—quaint daubs which went in a country inn for the work of an able artist, and every available space between these works of art was decorated with curios, old china plates, and I know not what besides, but all indicating that the landlord of The Frieslander was house-proud. Before I had taken full stock of the blue room, as this chamber was called, the girl was gone, and I was tossing my wet clothes in a heap on the floor as fast as I could remove them.

"Take these, master," cried Nicholas Taffin, the landlord, who came in with a bundle of garments and towels, which he flung on one of the chairs; and while I was drying myself before the blazing fire, whose warmth put new life into me, he went down to fetch a hot dish of stew, which he brought up steaming in a few minutes.

By that time I was a veritable Dutchman of the innkeeper's class, being clad in dark-brown baggy trousers, with a gray-coloured vest, all somewhat the worse for wear, and on my feet a pair of sabots—the first pair I had ever worn, so far as I can remember. Over my vest was a loose-fitting jacket, which was like everything else I had on at the moment—two sizes too big, and probably at one

time the clothing of a giant, since I was a lusty, stalwart fellow myself.

I laughed when I looked down at my figure; so also did the landlord, who stood a yard or two away, and criticised me facetiously, passing remarks on the fit, and the general appearance, which tickled him immensely.

"You must take this," said he, coming to the business in hand. "'Twill warm you."

And indeed it did, for when I sat down to a small table which he drew up before the fire, and began to ply my wooden spoon, the first mouthful brought tears to my eyes; the next seemed to set my throat on fire, and carried the warmth throughout my body. By the time I had emptied the dish I was in a glow, and every pore of my skin was opened. Whereas I had been wet and chilled to the bone, now I was covered with perspiration and seemed to be on fire; while the landlord, standing with his back against the corner of the fireplace, watched me with interest, to see how this meal affected me.

"How do you like what men call 'Taffin's hot-pot'?" he exclaimed when I set down my spoon.

"Don't ask me," I answered, gasping and perspiring, yet feeling grateful to the little man, who had doubtless saved me from a sickness which might have ended in death.

"Now tell me your story," said he after a while. But when I told it he looked at me with horror.

"Man, you are the first who ever went into that pool and came out alive, so far as I have ever heard. Men call it—secretly, for they dare not say the word aloud—'The Familiars' Pool.' Not far from here, say two hundred yards down the road, and on the other side, is a monastery. It is used as a Holy House of the Inquisition, and the Familiars move in and out among the towns and villages around. The grounds of the monastery stretch far behind, and end at the pool into which you fell. It deserves to be called the Pool of Hell, for it is said that when the Inquisitors have tortured some of the victims to their hearts' content, they take them thither and toss

them in, leaving them to die of cold or drown, as fate may have it.

"I have seen," he went on with bated breath—and he looked around him with a face full of horror and fear—"I have seen the pool myself, and more than one dead body floating there. But let me say no more," he exclaimed, waving his hand as if to brush away the memory. "'Tis like a nightmare to me!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE FAMILIARS IN THE BEDCHAMBER

I WAS dozing before the fire, finding it too pleasant to leave, either for bed or the kitchen, when I was aroused by the hasty entrance of the landlord.

"Pardon me, master, for my intrusion, but I want to ask a favour."

He stood within the door, which was partly closed behind him, and hesitated, as if he felt somewhat afraid to say what the reason was for his coming to me.

"What is the favour, Master Taffin?" I asked, looking up in some surprise.

"Here is some one escaped from the monastery, and he wants shelter. He knows I can give it to him, for he has more than once used my house before."

"And what is the favour?" I asked again, for he yet hesitated.

"The hiding place is in this room. Would you object?"

"Object?" I exclaimed, interrupting him, and jumping to my feet. "In God's name bring him here, and none shall know that he is in the room from anything that I shall say."

Taffin was gone almost before I had finished, and in a few seconds he brought in some one habited as the monks of the monastery were wont to be. His head was cowled, but when he entered the room, and the landlord had closed the door behind him, he threw the head gear back, and stood revealed, a man of fifty or thereabouts, his face deeply lined and black bearded. That in itself would have betrayed the fact that the garb he wore was a disguise, for he should have been clean shaven.

Not only so; his head was covered with thick black hair, and this, too, would have betrayed him had the wind thrown back his cowl. There was an eager, anxious look upon his handsome face, which, although I had never seen it before, had a look which was familiar, but in what way I could not tell at that first glance. The question, however, and the pressing one, was how he was to be hidden. He had escaped from the Inquisitors, who, as was often the case in the outlying districts, made the monasteries their headquarters, converting them into torture places and prison houses.

Standing there restlessly, while Taffin was bustling about, he turned his head repeatedly, as if to see that the door was fast, and to listen for anything which would indicate the approach of men in search for him. His whole soul was absorbed in the thought of getting somewhere out of sight, and although I was standing there, within a couple of yards of him, he took no notice of my presence, but divided his attention between the door and the bustling little landlord.

"For God's sake be quick, Taffin. I think I hear footsteps in the passage below."

"Come at once, Master Hesselaer," exclaimed Taffin.

At these words I turned with a start and gazed at the pseudo-monk—if I might call him such—with an eagerness that made him halt and gaze at me with a frightened look upon his face.

"Can I trust this man, Taffin?"

But I interposed.

"Trust me, sir, for none shall know where you are. 'Twas your name that startled me."

It was no time to ask questions or seek explanations, and Taffin, realizing this, thrust the monk across the room to an opening by the fireplace. The light had been shining upon it, and I had been facing it for a full half hour, but it had never occurred to me that the fireplace had a false side to it. The fugitive entered hastily, reassured by my words, the door went together with a scarcely audible click, and Taffin, without a word, crossed the floor and opened the door of the bedchamber to lis-

ten. There was no need for him to turn, as he did, to whisper:

"They have come."

I could hear voices below, and the servant maid, who had replenished the fire for me, was answering questions in a startled voice. Fortunately she was ignorant of what had transpired, so that she answered without hesitation the inquiry, which we heard distinctly:

"Has a monk been here, my daughter?"

"I have not seen one," was the ready reply.

There was a pause. Probably the questioner was peering into the girl's face as if to tell whether she had spoken the truth. Subtle and sly in their own methods, these creatures of the Inquisition suspected others, and could only be assured of the truthfulness of those whom they questioned by their manner in answering. Moreover, they were always face to face with the difficulty that none would betray a countryman to them unless their own lives were in danger, and a hundred subterfuges were resorted to by the people in order to secure the escape of the intended victim from the sleuthhounds of the Inquisition.

"Then have you seen a black-bearded, black-haired man, dressed in the garb of a citizen, with a golden chain about his neck and rings on his left hand?"

"Nay, I have seen none such for many a day," said the girl.

"Bethink you, daughter. Many come to a house of call such as this. We want a tall, broad-shouldered man. Men call him Pierre Hesselaer, and a countryman says that he saw a monk coming in this direction not many minutes since."

"I have not seen any such man enter The Frieslander," was the emphatic reply. "I have not been in this passage for the last half hour, so that I neither know who has come nor who has gone."

Making a virtue of discretion and necessity, Nicholas Taffin slipped down the stairs and asked the visitors their business, greeting them as though he had not heard a word of what had passed between them and Mary.

The same question was asked, but Nicholas answered it readily.

"I saw a monk go by the door not long since. He glanced down the passage, halted, indeed, as if he would enter, and then passed on.

"Did he enter?"

"How could I tell, father, seeing that when he had gone I turned in to see what my customers desired? He may have slipped in when my back was turned. Will you search the house?"

"Yes, my son."

The speaker bade one of his companions remain in the passage, while the other two, accompanied by the landlord, passed from room to room. The search was a long and close one, and it seemed to me that not a corner was missed. Last of all they entered the room in which I sat. I stood up and gazed at them with simulated surprise, but did not speak. I turned my face so that the light should not fall upon it, and waited quietly. But my soul was in turmoil. Who could tell whether these Inquisitors might not know me, even in this disguise? for, moving about freely with the prince's safe-conduct, my face must have been well known to many, and I might not have escaped the lynx eyes of the Familiars. Thinking of this, I altered the expression of my face, gave my mouth a slight twist, and screwed up my eyes somewhat. I do not think that even Caroline would have known me then.

The newcomers entered boldly. While one stood at the door the other passed round the room, drew back the curtains of the bedstead, went on his knees regardless of the loss of dignity, and looked beneath to see if the man they sought for was in hiding. Then he came to me and peered into my face. The shadow cast on it with my face turned away from the lamp and firelight did not satisfy him, for he put a hand on my shoulder and twisted me round. I endured his searching looks as stoically as possible, but it seemed to me as if that hand on my shoulder tightened like a vice; nay, rather as if I was placed in the instrument of torture, and the first twist, already given,

would be followed by another, and another. The eyes were hidden behind that forbidding cowl, but to me it was as though they flashed through the eyelet holes. Such is the force of imagination.

"What are you doing here, my son?" he said almost roughly, as if angry at finding that I was not Pierre Hesselaer. By my figure I might very well have been the man they sought. But my chin was beardless, and the only hair upon my face was my mustache. Moreover, my hair was not thick and heavy like that of the fugitive.

"I am resting here for the night, ere I start for Bruges," I answered unhesitatingly, taking care not to alter my face. It was truth, for my way led through that city.

"Quit the door, Renard, and see whether you think this room has any secret hiding place in it," said the Familiar to his companion, at the same time taking his hand away from my shoulder, and standing with his back to the fire, so as to watch and direct the search, and yet keep an eye on the landlord and me.

Renard stood in the centre of the room and looked about him keenly, as if considering the possibility of any such place in the bedchamber. He looked to the bedstead itself, and bade Taffin and me pull it out from the wall. Then he passed behind it, to see whether it was hollow. One place did not satisfy him. He said it sounded somewhat as if there was a place of concealment there, and told Taffin to open it instantly.

"I do not know how," replied the landlord honestly enough. "I have no suspicion of any chamber being there."

"Tap it yourself," said the Familiar. "Now, what does that sound like?"

"Hollow," Taffin answered curtly. If he were acting the part of innocence it was well done. "I do not know how to enter it," he added emphatically. "I never knew of its presence there."

"Then get something that will serve as a crowbar and remove the entrance. There is a space which I must look into."

The landlord quitted the room to do the bidding of the Inquisitor, and left me with these two men. They took no notice of me, however, but went on with their search, tapping everywhere. What if they found Pierre Hesselaer? Should they take him with them? Not if he asked for my assistance. The time had come when thousands, like myself, having tasted the sweets of liberty, would in no sense stand by to see others led to torture without a strenuous effort to achieve their release.

I looked through the window, and saw that the moon was just rising, so that the land was beginning to show, instead of the black darkness which had shut in everything. If they found the fugitive he and I were, physically, a match for the Inquisitors, and we might dash away into the night. There would be horses in the stable, without a doubt, and we could ride on to liberty. Bruges was but a dozen miles away.

But what of the little landlord of The Frieslander? He dared not stay there. Life, property, everything he held good, would be forfeited if the Familiars found that he had put Pierre Hesselaer into hiding. Yet life was more than property, and it was true, a thousand times over, that a man will barter everything he has to keep alive.

Who was this Pierre Hesselaer? That was the name of Caroline's father, and now I had the assurance that while I had not seen the face before, and that it yet appeared familiar to me, it was like Caroline's—as much as a father's and daughter's faces could resemble each other. The suggestion resolved itself into certainty. I was as sure that this was Caroline's father as that I stood in the room with these would-be tormentors. To me his life, for the dear one's sake, was worth everything—worth all the risk which would come in an attempted rescue. I had gone through so many dangers of late that my mind was resourceful in expedients, and while Nicholas Taffin was searching for an implement with which to break into the wall I framed a plan of action if the worst came.

By this time Renard had gone all round the room, tapping on the wall persistently, and smoothing his hand

over it, as if in search for any secret spring or crack. At last he came to the spot where Pierre Hesselaer was hiding.

"This sounds hollow, François."

François instantly left my side, and went to the place to tap for himself, and at that moment the landlord entered. They were so absorbed that they did not hear him, and when he saw where they were his eyes flashed; he gave me such a glance, and looked at his weapon so menacingly, that I knew he was of one mind with me. I thought for the moment, from the way in which he handled the iron bar, that he would have begun the conflict then and there by braining one of them, but when François turned he stood in simple indifference, as though he had no fear of anything resulting from the search.

"What is the meaning of this hollow sound?" asked the Inquisitor. "Tap the wall, and let Master Taffin hear it for himself."

"'Tis strange," said the landlord, with a look of surprise on his face. "But let me see." He advanced and looked at the spot, then into the fireplace. "You are tapping on the wall that makes the side of the fireplace itself," he observed.

"Nay, you are trifling," said François sternly, when he had looked. "There is space sufficient between this spot"—touching the inner wall—"and that place yonder for a couple of men to hide in. Give me the crowbar."

The Familiar took it from Taffin's hand and brought it down furiously upon the spot where Pierre Hesselaer had disappeared. It crashed, not through masonry, but through boarding which splintered before the blow. Throwing the iron bar upon the floor, the Inquisitor, with an exclamation of satisfaction, thrust in his hand and felt that the place was hollow. Then he and his companion, laying their strong hands upon the woodwork, tore it away, and Pierre Hesselaer was before them, drawn back into the farthest corner, as if he would escape the gaze of the hunters.

I had quietly gone to the table where I had flung down my sword, and taking it in my hand, picked up the dagger which had been lying beside it. This I thrust into my

belt, and I was loosening the sword in its scabbard when François cried:

"He is here!"

I looked at Nicholas Taffin. He had quietly stooped and picked up the crowbar, and was now standing with it in his hand. There was a look on his face which showed that the refugee would not be taken out of The Friesland without a struggle.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE RESCUE OF PIERRE HESSELAER

THE broken door in the wall now stood wide open, and Pierre Hesselaer, without a word from the Inquisitors, stepped forth.

"My son," said François, laying a hand upon his victim's shoulder; but before he had time to say more Pierre flung his arm backward with such force that when it struck the Familiar's face the man fell heavily to the floor. He whom François called Renard made as though he would step forward and grip Pierre by the arm, lest he should escape, but he hesitated when he saw our attitude. The landlord stood with his weapon in midair, ready to strike. My sword was drawn from its scabbard, and the dagger I handed to Hesselaer.

"If you raise any alarm you shall die," said I sternly, turning round so that the light fell on my face. There was no mistaking the look there when the two men glanced at me, and after François had risen to his feet they looked from one to another in turn, as we stood before them, cutting off their escape.

They must have been astounded, for this was a new experience to them. Hitherto they had but to appear in any house, or accost well-armed men upon the road, and their victims followed them tamely to their doom, so thoroughly had the spirit of the people been broken by the Inquisition and those who represented it. Resistance was almost unknown. I had never known of it myself until Caroline made that bid for liberty on her own initiative, and in one other case. The thing appeared so much in the nature of an outrage on established usage

that the Familiars could not believe it possible that we should mean what we said, for François bade us stand aside that they might take their prisoner with them.

"I go not with you alive," cried Hesselaer, and the dagger blade flashed in the light of the blazing fire.

"Then we shall call for help," said François resolutely. He could not bring himself to believe that although we were three to two, all armed with dangerous weapons, we should dare to lay hands on any who belonged to the Holy House not far away.

"I tell you again," I exclaimed, stepping forward, and drawing back my sword in readiness for a deadly thrust, "that if you dare call for help I will drive this through the body of the first who makes the attempt."

"And I will bring this down on the head of the second," cried Taffin, his crowbar raised in readiness.

Time was precious. If we waited long we might have three to deal with instead of two, for the third Familiar might come in search of his companions.

"Lock the door, landlord," were my words, and the thing was done.

"Now, sirs, throw off your cowls." But the Familiars did not move.

"You heard me?"

"Yes," was the sullen reply.

"Then obey at once."

Still they did not move, save to whisper to each other. Then they separated, and Renard began to call out in spite of what had been said. He was farther away from me, but his call had scarcely begun when he fell heavily to the floor. The landlord was as good as his word; his poised crowbar came down with a crash upon the Inquisitor's head.

"Now, François, as you are called," I observed, turning to the other, "you will be treated like your companion if you so much as whisper. Throw off your cowl."

The man obeyed sullenly and stood revealed. I was astounded when he had done as I had bidden, for he was none other than the priest whom I had seen in the cathedral at Leyden with Francis Guion; the same who had

bound me hand and foot in Guion's bedroom. The whirligig of time had brought me my revenge, and I could not help telling him so.

"Do you remember Francis Guion?" I asked tauntingly.

He was startled into surprise, and still more so when I went on:

"And Master Bertrand Blomberg, whom you bound hand and foot in Guion's room? Look at me, for I am he, although you may not know me in this garb."

He cursed me, but knew that he dared not cry out for aid.

"Master Hesselaer," I said again, "tear up this man's cowl into strips, and we will bind him and his comrade. If he resists we can find a way by which he may learn submission."

He still went on cursing me and the others, and when he refused to desist we gagged him, so that he lay on the floor helpless, and unable to speak.

"Now go down and bring up the other Familiar, Master Taffin," said I, when the last knot had been tied. "Bring him quickly, and shut the door when he enters lest he should escape."

The landlord was not long away, for presently we heard him say:

"This way." On that the door opened, and some one in the Inquisition garb came in. Taffin followed, and closing the door instantly, turned the key and stood there, seemingly enjoying himself, although ruin stared him in the face. For it was impossible, after this, with the monastery so near, that he should live on at The Friesländer.

"Come this way," said I to the Familiar who, having seen the others lying on the floor, had stood still and was trembling. Fearing lest he might call out for help, as Renard had attempted to do, I bade him be silent, and then, seeing no way of escape, he came forward, with a peculiar halting step. The fact attracted my attention, but only passingly.

"Throw off your cowl."

"There is no need," responded the other, who started somewhat when he saw me.

"But there *is* need."

"What are you going to do to me?" asked he, looking down on the two Inquisitors. "I am no Familiar. I did but come because they asked me, since their usual companion was sick. I am not even one of their fraternity. I am simply a guest at the monastery. Let me depart on my own business."

"Do as I bid you," was my stern response.

"Yes, do as you are bid, or I will bring this down on your pate," said Nicholas Taffin, waving the crowbar threateningly. He looked as if he would very much like to use it.

The hideous covering was removed reluctantly, and the Familiar stood before us. His eyes met mine, and I could not repress a cry of astonishment.

"Francis Guion!"

"Be not hard on me, Master Blomberg," he exclaimed, going on his knees, as if to plead with me. "I told you the truth just now. I am no Inquisitor. I am but a guest at the monastery, and meant no harm. Let me go! I swear before Heaven that if you let me go I will be silent as to what you have done to yonder men," he added, pointing to his prostrate fellows.

His face was pale; his eyes seemed to protrude with terror; the sweat stood on his forehead in great beads, and his hands clasped and opened, and clasped again, as though he felt that death was certain, and feared it mortally.

"You scurvy coward!" cried the landlord, giving him a hearty kick; and even while Guion was holding up his clasped hands in the act of entreaty, he flung a strip of cloth about them, and had it in a knot in a trice.

"Let me go!" the wretched creature pleaded, his face now wet with tears.

"Nay, buy your life," I exclaimed sternly, "by taking solemn oath not to harm the Prince of Orange."

A strange, sly look came into his face, and after a moment's thought he answered:

"I will take the oath."

Did that crafty look mean that he would swear whatever I chose to demand, since he could be absolved from such an oath at any time? I have thought so since, and have wished a hundred times that I had killed him there and then. It would have saved our country infinite sorrow if I had crushed him out of existence as one sets his foot remorselessly on crawling vermin. When I took his oath on the cross which François wore about his neck I had not counted on that shameless subterfuge to which the Church of Rome continually stoops. I had forgotten that that Church made it a part of its teaching to justify the departure from absolute truth; that it was ever ready with its ambiguities, reservations, and equivocations. This wretch upon his knees before me was well versed in those Jesuitical methods which justified dissimulation. I never knew an oath more solemn, nor did one ever follow my words, as I dictated them, more readily than Francis Guion. I knew later how he was wont to play about the edge of the pit of hell, even as they did who taught him how to lie in the name of religion.

He wished to swear another oath—to be silent as to what we had done to the Familiars, so that he might be set free, but we would not listen. He began to scream when we flung him to the floor to bind him like the others, and therefore we gagged him.

"We must be gone," said Nicholas Taffin, rising to his feet, when he had looked to see that every knot was firmly placed. "These men may be missed and search made for them."

We left the room, locking the door after us, and then turned into another chamber to take council together.

Less than an hour later the moon was shining clearly, and we were all three riding by a roundabout way to Bruges, alert against surprise from any who might challenge us. The landlord was by no means downcast at having to leave his home. He took it philosophically when I expressed my wonder, and declared that he had expected the thing to come for so many years past that

he looked upon himself as a tenant of The Frieslander "on lease," the lease to expire without notice. Attached to his saddle were some well-filled leathern bags, which, when he lifted and shook them, gave forth the chink of gold.

"They will serve my turn, Master Blomberg, and if I get to Bruges I shall put them to good use. These bags have been ready for many a long day, growing fuller as the time has gone; and I took good care not to lay in too big a stock at the inn, so that the loss would be less when things came to the worst. My regret is that I could not bring the old place with me, for I love it well. It was my father's before me, and my grandfather's also; but while they prospered under the emperor's rule, and his predecessor, I have found things go from bad to worse with Philip as king, what with his shameful taxation and these stalking devils of the Inquisition."

"And what if you chance to lose those bags before we get to Bruges?"

He shrugged his shoulders, and observed that there were other bags in the city which he had carried thither for safety.

Master Hesselaer had been silent, riding on with his chin upon his bosom, as if full of thought. At first I had not cared to intrude upon him, but when we were well on the way and the moon lit up the land so that we could see on all hands if any approached who were likely to give us trouble, I asked if he was the father of Caroline Hesselaer. He turned round instantly, an eager look taking the place of that dull apathy which had marked his bearing during the first few miles.

"I am," he exclaimed. "Do you know anything of her?"

"I saw her not many hours since," I answered, somewhat surprised at his question. I had contrived to pass on word to his mansion that his daughter was safe, and supposed that he knew my connection with her. He pulled up his horse and stared at me in such astonishment that I thought he had suddenly become demented. For a few moments he did not speak. Then, as if he had

found the power of speech, which had apparently deserted him, the words burst from his lips:

"She is dead!"

I was certain now that his recent perils had sent him mad, and had driven from his memory all the messages I had forwarded. With a great pity in my heart I told him, as we rode along, where she was and what had transpired; how she had fought the Familiars and had escaped, and was now in hiding, only waiting for my return to take her back to Antwerp. I shall never forget his look when he was assured that his daughter lived.

"Thank God!" he cried. And pulling up his horse, he bared his head and prayed. Then, taking my hand in his, he thanked me, his face wet with tears, and his voice so broken with emotion that he could scarcely frame the words he wished to utter.

When we had started on our way again, urged on by Nicholas Taffin, who told us we were yet in danger, I expressed my surprise that he was in ignorance of his daughter's movements.

"Master Blomberg, I have mourned for her as dead ever since the night in which she was removed by the Familiars. I had gone from home quietly, having heard that the Inquisitors were after me. One who knew of my hiding place came and told me that he had just seen my daughter taken from the house, and brought me word that I was being sought for also. What became of that kind messenger I do not know, for I have not seen him since. Perhaps he is dead and gone, tracked and tortured by my hunters. I dared not go near my home. All through the weary days I have been in hiding, cut off from every one who could tell me what was going on. The Familiars found me last week and thrust me into yonder monastery, whence I managed to escape. Had I followed my good friend's advice"—pointing to Nicholas Taffin—"I might never have fallen into their hands. But then I might not have known you, and possibly should have died some day still mourning my child as dead."

I called to mind, while he was speaking, the many mes-

sages Peter Bakkerzeel had brought to Caroline, and the wit and cunning amazed me. He had marked how much she loved her father, and realizing how great a grief it would be to her to learn of his disappearance, and how she might reasonably fear that he had fallen into the hands of the Familiars, had concocted stories and messages which had no foundation of truth in them. Thank God, the thing had ended well, and Caroline was not to sorrow for the loving deception.

We rode on a little farther, but unexpectedly Master Hesselaer pulled up his horse, and turned its head toward The Frieslander.

"Master Blomberg, let us return and find her."

"Nay, Master Hesselaer, it can not be. I have pressing news for the Prince of Orange, and the liberties of all the people hang upon its speedy carriage. Let us press on, and later we will go to her."

"But she may yet fall into their power," he remonstrated.

"Nay, she is safe. Let us proceed."

He yet lingered, and had it not been for a warning from Taffin, he might have prevailed upon me to return.

"See yonder!" cried the landlord.

We turned instantly, and saw him pointing across the country. Far away, with a forest for background, we could see the glancing of armour, and listening, could hear the thud of horses' hoofs. The moon was shining brilliantly, and her cold light fell on helmets and spear points, on shining breastplates and steel trappings. We waited a little while to discover in what direction this body of horsemen travelled, and saw that they were riding out of the forest into the open. They came by scores. In a few brief minutes there were hundreds of them coming toward us, but whether they were Spaniards or the soldiers of the Duke of Anjou we could not tell.

"On to Bruges!" I cried, spurring my horse forward, and followed by the others. And on we rode, hearing as we went the clang of armour and the heavy stamping of hundreds of horses coming on the still night air.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE ALARM AT BRUGES

WHEN we reached the gates of the city we found them closed, and the wardens refused to admit us. It was in vain that we told them of our danger, and of the peril which threatened, for we had little doubt that the troops behind us were those of Anjou, marching on Bruges in pursuance of the plan which I had overheard alike in the duke's bedchamber in Antwerp and in the castle whither I had been carried prisoner.

"Go, then, and tell the burgomaster that we must speak with him instantly," I cried, angry at the chief warden's obduracy.

"I shall do nothing of the kind," was the surly response. "Do you suppose that Master de Grijse is to be called from his warm bed whensoever any sturdy beggar chooses to ask for him?"

Suddenly it dawned upon me that I was no longer dressed in the garb of a gentleman of the prince's court, and looking at myself in the broad moonlight I saw, what I had quite forgotten, that in the hurry of getting away from The Frieslander I had not changed my countryman's garments for those I had previously been wearing, and which Nicholas Taffin had set aside to dry.

"The burgomaster is to be called from his bed at any hour if the safety of the city is threatened," I answered angrily. "Master Warden, you may have your rules and your opinions, but you keep me here at your peril."

The fellow laughed, and bade me go elsewhere and suffer him to pursue his duty in peace. But in the midst of his talk one of his own men broke in upon his words.

"The man speaks truly, Hans. See yonder! A hundred shining helmets—nay, a thousand! Let the men in instantly!"

I think the chief warden would have demurred even then, but his own men settled the matter for him, since they drew the bolts and dropped the chains without asking his leave, and before long we were within the city, and the gates safely barred behind us.

Leaving the others to follow at their leisure, I spurred on my way to the burgomaster's house, which was in the market place, and known to the men of Bruges as the Cranenburg. Thundering on the door with the handle of my sword, I roused the sleepy porter and bade him call Master de Grijse instantly, since the city was in danger. The fellow, now wide-awake, hurried up the broad staircase, shouting while he went, as if he purposed waking his master before he had time to reach the door of his bedchamber. It was no time to study ceremony, and I hurried after him, intruding on the burgomaster before he had time to jump from his bed. I told my story while he dressed, a task which took the active magistrate but little time, and in an hour from the moment when the city gate had clanged behind me the burghers' guard was out, the walls were manned, and the whole city was aroused by the great bell in the belfry, whose notes were only heard when Bruges was in peril. When I had galloped along the broad old-fashioned streets my horse's feet had clattered on the stones and awoke the echoes of a sleeping city. But now the citizens were crowding to the market place to know the reason of the night alarm; men were buckling on their swords as they ran, or lacing up their doublets while inquiring of those they overtook what was now threatening them. But none knew certainly until they heard the clear voice of De Grijse on the frosty air telling of the danger, and the perfidy of the Duke of Anjou.

"Shall we admit his men?" he cried.

"No! a thousand times no!" was the mighty shout.

"Then be it so, citizens. I will hold Bruges for the Prince of Orange. Now let every man stand true, be

these soldiers from Spain or in the pay of the shameless Son of France."

I was far too weary to undertake the ride to Antwerp without a rest, but a score of volunteers were found ready to take the road either to Antwerp or to any of the cities whose liberties were assailed. The fleetest horses in Bruges were requisitioned, and men, bearing hastily written letters from the burgomaster, sallied forth from the northern gate to warn Dunkirk, Ostend, Vilvoorde, Alost, and other towns of what was contemplated.

Unfortunately, as the event proved, they were too late in some instances. Dunkirk had fallen into the snare an hour before the messenger arrived. Captain Chamois, who acted as commandant, had been so friendly with the citizens that burgomaster, councillors, and people had esteemed themselves secure, and did not trouble. The few French soldiers in the place, however, quarrelled in the daytime with some artisans who were passing to their homes for their midday meal. This drew the attention of the people to the uproar in some streets on the side of the city farthest away from the gate through which Chamois admitted some fifteen hundred mercenaries, who manned the walls and awed the citizens into surrender. That was the story in half a dozen other important places.

But what of Antwerp, where the prince was said to be staying with King Stork? That name was on every lip—spoken with scorn and hate by reason of his perfidy. Men stamped their feet and beat upon their breasts in anger throughout Bruges as news came in of the doings in the places I had named. They feared the worst, talked of the ban, which of late had been somewhat forgotten, tore down the picture of the duke which had been placed in the gallery of the Tour des Halles, and flung it into a huge fire which had been kindled in the market place, together with his Grace's effigy. Wherever there was a reminder of Anjou the people expressed their indignation by its instant destruction.

At first my mind was set at rest concerning the safety of Antwerp. I had seen the messenger go forth—a splendid fellow, capable as a horseman, knowing every inch

of the road, and ready to hold his own in case it came to fighting. But when these reports came in of the doings at Ostend and Alost I began to fear, and a restlessness came upon me that I could not put aside. When sunset had come my anxiety was so keen that I resolved to see Master de Grijse, and tell him of my fears that the message had miscarried. He was holding a council at the time, but I passed into the council chamber and broke in upon the deliberations of the councillors, who looked at me and wondered whether anything new had come to light.

"News has come, Master de Grijse, that Vilvoorde has fallen into the duke's hand," said I, when the burgomaster asked me my business, even while I crossed the floor. He saw by my grave face that something was amiss.

"'Tis worse and worse, gentlemen!" he cried. "And yet we can do nothing but hold our own, even if we can do as much."

"I have come to ask permission to quit Bruges, Master de Grijse, because I can not shake off the fear that the message to the prince has miscarried."

"God forbid!" exclaimed those who sat at the council table.

"I would fain go and see for myself," said I, when silence had fallen on the little assembly. "I should never forgive myself for my cowardice if I stayed here in comparative security while I was not sure that his Highness knew of what was threatening him. There is yet time if I start at once, for Antwerp was not to be assailed until the other places were secured—until the sixteenth or seventeenth of the month. Will you give me a pass through the city gates and a good horse?"

"'Tis a dangerous errand, Master Blomberg," De Grijse remonstrated.

"What of that? If Antwerp falls the prince falls, and with him fall all our liberties. Then we shall have that accursed Inquisition in the northern provinces again. I pray you do not detain me."

He signed an order for me at once, and gave instructions for a fleet horse to be placed at my disposal. While it was being prepared for the journey I thought of my

best course. The journey, with all the windings of the roads and the necessity for taking a roundabout course in order to avoid any bodies of troops that might seek to stop communications, would make a ride of sixty miles. One of the councillors, standing at my side in the court-yard, suggested that I should ride to Axel, where he knew I should be able to secure a good horse, and once there I might then decide my route according to circumstances.

When I reached the city gate it was already opened for me; it clanged together while my horse answered to the spur and bounded forward. I had not gone a quarter of a mile before the way led along a road bounded by high hedges. An order came for me to halt, but I galloped on. Then a shot went whizzing by, followed by a second and a third, but in the darkness I was missed. The fact that the order was given in the French tongue assured me that I had run the gantlet at my peril, and I began to think that farther on I might have less good fortune. It was better to turn aside out of the beaten way, and this I did as soon as I dashed into the open country again.

A ride for a mile or two across the polders followed, and I took the stars for my guide. Suddenly my horse stumbled and fell. I was hurled headlong, but fell lightly on the soddened soil, otherwise my journey might have been cut short at the outset. Jumping to my feet, little the worse for my fall, I saw that my steed had already recovered his footing. In going to him I tumbled over the body of a man. Feeling about him I concluded, from the lack of armour, that it was a Netherlander, and then I struck a light by the aid of my tinder box, so that I might see whether the poor fellow was dead or not.

The first glance, as the light flamed up, showed me that news had not reached Antwerp. It was the messenger who had started for that city, and now he lay dead, shot through the brain. There was no time to be lost. I could not serve him, for he was past all service in this world, save that of finding him decent burial; but that I dared not stay for. My horse was unhurt, and mounting, I rode on my way.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE SPANISH PINNACES

It was midnight when my tired horse went down the main street of Axel at a slow trot. He had done his forty miles in splendid style, and it would have been cruelty to drive him hard now. Pulling up in front of a hostelry, where the town's watchman was gossiping with a hostler who was about to put out the lantern which hung over the door, I asked for the landlord.

"He has been gone to bed these two hours," said the hostler, pausing in the act of blowing out the burning candle. "Who would expect to find any honest man save a poor hostler and the watchman out of bed at this hour? Could you not have come sooner, master?"

It was a good-natured sort of grumble, for he saw that my business must be urgent by the look of my foam-covered horse.

"I am on the prince's business," I cried. "Time is pressing, and the prince is in danger; so if you do not care to disturb the landlord let me have your best horse, unless there be a better in the town."

"Our best is not up to much, master. Nothing to compare with such an animal as this," he added, pointing to the creature that had served me so well. "Andrew Bardez, who lives yonder, has the finest bit of horse-flesh on this side of the country, and if it is to serve the prince—God save him!—he will let you have him instantly. But he's in bed."

"Then we will call him up," said I. "Show me the way, for 'tis a matter of life and death."

"Is it to foil King Stork?" asked the watchman.

"It is to save the prince and Antwerp, if I can."

"Then come this way," cried the two men in a breath; and leaving the inn to take care of itself, they walked with me to a house a hundred yards off. Before we got so far the hostler, realizing the value of time, ran forward and banged on the door with such vigour that a dozen heads came from different windows round about, the owners demanding to know the reason for the clamour.

"'Tis a gentleman for you, Master Bardez, one on the prince's business, which is pressing; a matter of life and death. Hasten down and let him in."

Master Bardez's head disappeared before the hostler had ended what he had to say. The mere mention of the fact that I was on the prince's errand caused the dismissal of all annoyance at having been disturbed, and before long he was at the door, bidding the hostler take my tired horse to the stable and attend to his wants, while he himself would saddle his own for my further use. But I must needs have refreshment, since more haste would prove less speed to a hungry man. The watchman, forgetting his immediate duty in his desire to hear the news first-hand, followed me into the house, where the nearly dead fire was soon revived; and while I eat heartily what was truly a welcome meal, I told what had happened.

Master Bardez stood with bent head and listened thoughtfully, his back to the fire and his hands behind him. Now and again his foot fidgetted on the sanded floor, and when I had ended my story and turned my full attention to the bread and meat upon the table, he fell into a reverie.

I had finished, and was rising to depart, when he spoke:

"I will go with you, sir."

I looked up inquiringly, and not at all sorry to hear him say this, for I was not quite sure of the road from this point.

"If you would, Master Bardez——"

"You dare not ride straight to Antwerp," he interrupted. "From what you have said, it seems to me most probable that the road on this side of Antwerp may be full

of soldiers, and entrance by the Kipdorp gate may prove impossible. I would advise you to go to Liefkenshoek, where we can take boat and pull up the river, getting into the city that way. But of course you must decide."

"Can we depend on getting a boat, Master Bardez?"

"A dozen if you wanted them, for Liefkenshoek is opposite to Lillo. I know of one man who has a boat, and can find us a couple of trustworthy fishermen who will pull you to Antwerp. Will you take me for your guide?"

There was no need to ask such a question, and half an hour later we were on the road, a hundred people having come into the street to see us off. Those who had thrust their heads out of the windows on my arrival had heard that mischief was stirring, and when the watchman had gone out again he had satisfied their curiosity, and others were roused to be told of what was happening. Axel was a quiet, sleepy little place, to which news of the outer world seldom came, and being away from the main roads between the larger towns, the doings were known of later far than in many a village along the highways. But loyalty did not sleep there, and by the time I had started men were looking up their weapons and trying to decide on some course of action that would serve the common cause. We rode off amid cheers for the prince and maledictions for King Stork—"the hateful duke," as many called Anjou—and on we went into the quiet country, bound for the Scheldt.

It was well that I had a guide, for this was new country to me. The polders gave me no help in the way of landmarks; they were so monotonous, the windmills being so much alike, and set up so indiscriminately, that they confused a stranger. But Bardez went on and on, leading the way along the dikes, then cautiously across the massive flood gates. Now and again we found night men working at the canal embankments, and dropped them word as we went of what was stirring in the land, the news sending them home to fetch their arms, and prepare for fight if necessary. Everywhere the savage maledictions showed how intense was the hate of the Dutch for the

Frenchman whom the Prince of Orange had imposed upon the people against their will.

"He is as bad as Alva!" cried more than one.

It was nearly day dawn when we pulled up at a house on the riverside, and found the inmates already astir. They had heard nothing, but before I had told all I knew the boat was being got ready, and half a dozen fishermen were volunteering to pull us up to the city.

It was the journey up the river which proved our real trouble. Farther down, toward the sea, lay a Spanish fleet, and the night before a couple of pinnaces had sailed past Liefkenshoek, but for what purpose none could say. They flew the white flag, which might mean that they came on a peaceful errand, desiring to carry some message to the Prince of Orange; but who could say what perfidy was afoot? Of cruelty and subterfuge the Spaniards had abundance; of honour in war they had none, as I had had cause to know by reason of the treachery which ended in my own father's death. Those Spaniards had shifty consciences, and dealt freely in lies of exigency. They fell back on their old Romish teaching, that promises do not bind when one has not the intention of binding one's self in making them. Knowing that, one had no faith in the white flag of friendship; so that when we pulled out into the stream and went up the river with the rising tide, knowing that the Spaniards were between us and our goal, we were full of anxiety.

The four fishermen who went with us knew of the danger in store, but they sent the boat forward at a tremendous speed. They bent their backs to the work, knowing that the fate of a great city was depending on their efforts. An hour's delay might prove fatal alike to Antwerp, the prince, and the liberties of all the provinces.

A sudden bend, just as the wintry sun forced its way through the mist that had fallen on the river, brought us face to face with the trouble we anticipated. A couple of pinnaces were coming down the stream, still flying the flag of which we had such doubts. They came on, widely separated, somewhat hugging the banks, and leaving the midstream clear, so that in order to pass them we should

have to shoot in between and take the risks. One of the men suggested that we should run into a creek close at hand, to hide until they had gone by, but we had been seen, and must needs go on now or turn back.

"Go on!" I shouted. "Take the flags for what they profess, and let us hope 'tis all right."

The men bent to the task with a fine will, and the boat, with the tide in her favour, shot along at a great pace. But as we went on one of the pinnaces swung across the river, as if to place herself in our path and cut us off.

"Pull!" I exclaimed; but a moment later an order came from the pinnace calling on us to stop.

"Go on!" cried the men to each other, bending to their work with still greater energy, so that when I steered the boat out of the way of the oncoming Spanish craft it plunged past her, putting her between us and the other pinnace. The water flew up at our bows, and the oars cut clean as we bounded on, not wasting breath in any retort to the oaths which the Spaniards sent after us.

"Words break no bones," the old saying runs, and we could have taken plenty of them without caring, for we were used to Spanish abuse. It was altogether different when a shot came from a brass gun on the deck, and splashed into the water right ahead. Great drops flew around and fell on us, but the single shot did us no further harm. Then one raised a musket. I knew the man, for it was none other than one of those whom I had seen in the Duke of Anjou's bedchamber. I can not now recall his name. I only remembered his face, and knew him also by the star upon his breast; but he was a Frenchman without a doubt. If one wanted further proof of Anjou's perfidy it was there, and Bardez remarked it. While he spoke a flash came, and one of our men bent over his oar with a cry of pain.

I thought that he was dead and stepped forward to catch his oar, lest it should tumble out of the boat, but he raised himself and began to pull again, though feebly. A stroke or two was as much as he could do, and then he laid a hand upon his chest, just above his heart.

"It struck me there," said he; "but pull on, comrades. See! they are coming after us!"

I looked, and already the pinnace was slowly turning, as if to give chase.

"Let me take your place," I cried, stepping forward. While I did so another shot came. It whistled past me, struck the poor fellow, who was now standing up, full in the heart, and he tumbled over into the stream. He was dead without a doubt, for he sank like a stone.

Sitting in his place, I pulled lustily with the others, the shots following continuously, spitting into the water to right and left, but providentially not one struck us. Rowing unceasingly, we distanced our pursuers, who finally gave up the chase and turned to go downstream again.

A few minutes' rest enabled us to regain our breath, and then we pulled on with what speed we could. There was no sound of disturbance when we entered the harbour. I listened eagerly between the strokes for signs of fighting, but heard none. Yet the harbour did not present its usual appearance of bustle. Burghers stood in knots on the wharf, and when, having landed, I hastened along the streets to find the prince, whose house was near the citadel, I noticed that men stood at their shop doors and at street corners, talking eagerly. It was plain, however, that I was not too late, and I thanked God for it.

Antwerp, I thought, could yet be saved.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE FURY AT ANTWERP

WHEN I reached the mansion which the Prince of Orange occupied I saw a Frenchman coming down the steps, and knew him as the private secretary of the Duke of Anjou.

"Good morning, Monsieur Quinsay," said I, as we brushed shoulders in passing, for he was not looking to see where he was going. When he looked up there was a savage frown on his face, and instead of returning my greeting he muttered, I know not what, although I was sure it was something uncomplimentary to me and to my master. But this was no time to pick a quarrel, and I bounded up the steps two or three at a time.

"Where is the prince?" I asked of Schetz, whom I saw standing in the hall.

"In his study," he answered, but he was staring at me in bewilderment, and almost gasped out the words, "I thought you were dead!"

"I have come to life again," I exclaimed, hurrying forward; but as I crossed the hall to pass behind the staircase I called back: "I will tell you all presently."

I scarcely waited for the call to enter in response to my hasty knock upon the door, and going in hurriedly, I saw the prince sitting before the fire, his feet outstretched, and he himself staring into it moodily. He did not even look round to see who it was that had entered, but sat there with his head bent down and his arms folded.

"Your Highness," said I, for matters pressed, and there was no time for ceremony.

He looked round quickly and gazed at me in astonishment. The apathy was gone, and he sprang to his feet, holding out his hand to greet me.

"Master Blomberg, they told me you were dead!" he exclaimed. "I thank God it was a false report," and he shook me heartily by the hand. "But what is your business? You look travel-stained and anxious."

"I am, your Highness, for I bring serious news. The city is in danger."

He did not start, as I supposed he would, and here I was puzzled. Had he known he would surely have been alert, and the guards would have been doubled, the wharfs would have been watched by armed burghers, and there would have been sounds of warfare instead of the every-day-life tokens.

"You bring me the same mistaken story that a score of others have done, Master Blomberg," said he, a look of annoyance crossing his face.

"Mistaken story, your Highness?" I asked, now completely taken aback. "Pardon me, I know not what others have told you, but I know that the story I bring is far too real, and that Antwerp is in danger such as you little suspect."

The look of annoyance passed, and now the prince was watching me keenly. He must have been impressed by my earnestness, for he bade me say what I had to say quickly.

"Have I been mistaken after all, and have I lived in a fool's paradise?" he asked, while he passed to the chair at the table and sat down there.

"I must needs tell your Highness in a few words my story from the day I disappeared," said I.

"Then sit and tell it."

He saw that I was weary.

The story did not take long to tell, for I only told what most needed telling at the time. There was that interview between the duke and his gentlemen, followed by my capture, and the journey to the castle where I was to be imprisoned. From that I passed on to tell of what I had heard while in hiding, when Anjou was arranging

with Parma for the admission of Spanish garrisons into the cities which Anjou was to seize. The prince could see how helpless I had been, and how impossible for me to reach Antwerp earlier. The attempt on Bruges carried conviction, and the adventure in the Scheldt, when the men on the Spanish pinnaces fired on my boat, strengthened it. The letter of Catherine de Medici, which I showed him last of all, removed every lingering doubt.

"Master Blomberg, I trust you are not too late. I have no alternative but to acknowledge that I have been very blind. I could not bring myself to believe that the Duke of Anjou could be such a scoundrel. There have been strange forebodings among the leading men of the city. A man came into the main guardhouse last night, masked, and bade the wardens there tell me that a great crime was about to be committed. Then he hurried away, and when the men on duty followed him they saw no one. I put it down to a drunken freak, but the councillors and officers of the burgher guard insisted that mischief was afoot, but in what form none could think. The suspicion spread, and all the night through the people were in the streets, talking and wondering, and wishing to know something definite. But what could I do? I knew of nothing, and contented myself with endeavouring to reassure those who came to me, ordering the chains to be stretched across the streets, the drawbridge to be raised at each gate, and the burgher guard to be ready for a sudden call. At daybreak the burgomaster and a dozen others came here and remonstrated with me. They declared that these suspicions must have some foundation, that where there was smoke there was fire, and so on. I saw the duke last evening, and he seemed surprised, assuring me that the news which had come in from Alost and Vilvoorde was a pure fabrication in order to create an estrangement between us. And I believed him, he spoke so fairly.

"'You shall go and see Anjou yourself, Doctor Alostanus,' said I to the burgomaster, and an hour later he came back, as much concerned as I that the duke was

wronged by our suspicions. Not long since his Grace sent his private secretary, Monsieur Quinsay."

"I saw him, your Highness," I interrupted, "and there was an angry frown upon his face. I thought, too, that I heard him say something disparaging concerning yourself."

"Let that pass," said the prince. "He came to say that the duke was much disturbed, and was prepared to shed every drop of blood in the defence of the city, and desiring that I would accompany his Grace to the camp, and see for myself how false the mischievous whispers were. That would have been fatal, as I can well see now, and fortunately I declined. That will explain Monsieur Quinsay's frown. He was disappointed."

A brief pause followed, during which the prince approached the window and looked into the street. I also looked, and saw that it was empty. It was now midday, and the people had evidently gone to their meal. A horse was standing at the foot of the steps, the rein flung over the iron railings.

"Blomberg," said the prince, turning round with that quick decisive shrug of his shoulder which showed that he was bent on action, "are you too tired to go and see what is doing at the Kipdorp gate?"

"No, your Highness."

"Then take yonder horse and ride thither with haste. Bid the wardens raise the drawbridge, and suffer none to come in or go out without my express permission. 'Tis on that side that the French camp lies. As for the rest, tell Master Schetz to come to me instantly. We will save Antwerp yet."

The streets were deserted as I spurred my horse along. Here and there a door was open, and I saw the citizens at their meals; but I saw more than that—sufficient to show that if the prince was unsuspecting the people were not. Swords lay on the tables, muskets were leaning against chair backs, and men who were enrolled in the burgher guard were in their uniforms, ready, if the call came, to be at their posts without delay.

My progress was slower than it would have been ordi-

narily, for chains were stretched across the ends of different streets, and some were too high for my horse to leap them. Now and again an idler standing near would drop one for me; other times I had to dismount to clear the way.

"What is the matter, master?" asked one who stood at a street corner, and saved me the trouble of jumping out of my saddle.

"The duke means mischief," I responded. "Tell all you meet to arm themselves and await the sounding of the tocsin." I galloped forward while I spoke.

Suddenly I pulled up my horse. I had come within sight of the Kipdorp gate when I saw a small cavalcade in front of me. The duke was there, riding on in spite of his solemn promise to my master that he would not leave the city that day. Following on, I came within a hundred yards of the gate when a shot was heard. At that moment a warden who was standing in the middle of the gateway threw up his arms, and falling backward on the stones lay as if dead. Then a body of French soldiers rushed through the gateway just as the guard hurried out of the gate house to know the meaning of that shot, and the cry which followed. They cut down the Flemings, and raised a shout which came ringing along the street:

"Ville gaignée, ville gaignée! Vive la messe! Tue, tue, tue!"

I saw that I was too late, and wheeled round at once, spurring my horse to a furious gallop, and shouting as I went :

"Treason! treason!"

Men came to their doors when I was passing by, and found out for themselves as they looked down the street toward the gate that the duke's raid had begun. I turned and saw that some French horsemen were galloping after me, raising that same shout:

"Ville gaignée, ville gaignée! Vive la messe! Tue, tue, tue!"

Shots were now heard, and screams, and I knew that the massacre had commenced. King Stork had not received his name in vain, for he was already beginning to

destroy the people. Everywhere, as I passed, the chains went up behind me, and the citizens, without waiting for their leaders, began to erect barricades and plant themselves behind them, armed and resolute.

But the Frenchmen came on, galloping and screaming, intent to get into the heart of the city. Their progress was stopped at various points, and they had to get down side streets and ride along narrow winding lanes, where, at times, they could only go two or three abreast. Many a time they got separated, and found themselves in furious combat with the citizens, who shot down the horses and then fought the dismounted riders. There was no quarter given in such a fight as that. Even the women joined in it, catching up whatever weapon they could lay hands on. But this I did not see, for I was intent on getting back to the prince, so that the great tocsin should be rung. A man was standing at the tower door as I passed across the open space. Turning my horse aside, which was now covered with foam after that furious ride, I shouted to the man:

"The French are in the city!"

He waited for no orders, but rushed within, and ere I had crossed the square the brazen tongue was sounding out its call to every quarter of Antwerp. Before I reached the prince the streets were full of armed men. Burghers rushed to the Bourse, the appointed meeting place in time of tumult. Artisans who had just turned into their shops for the afternoon's toil came out with their heavy tools, murderous weapons in the hands of men with brawny arms and giant strength. Men working at their forges, naked down to the waist, grimy with the soot of the furnaces, and the sweat of their daily labour still on them, hurried into the streets at the noise of the tocsin, and ran to their homes for bandoleer or sword or dagger, or whatever weapon they could lay their hands upon. They were heedless of everything save that one purpose and endeavour, to save the city.

The councillors had been meeting, and they came out of the stadthouse, throwing off their robes as they ran, leaving them to take their chance, so that they, like the

workmen, might reach their homes and get their arms. Even children were ready for the fray. They stood with their mothers at the windows, or ran through the house, picking up whatever they might use as missiles to hurl on the Frenchmen if they came that way. Through the open doors one could see the women stirring their fires to heat great kettles, in readiness to throw the scalding water on their perfidious enemies.

"What is the meaning of this, Blomberg?" cried the prince, who was standing full armed on the steps of his mansion with Schetz and other gentlemen of his household about him, ready for the fight.

"The French are rushing into the city, and will soon be at the Bourse," I shouted. Yet I could scarcely help laughing when I saw a lad of twelve with a musket in his hands and loading it, although he had scarcely strength to carry the cumbersome weapon. With him was a still smaller boy, tottering under the weight of an old firearm he had found somewhere—a burden which would have taxed the strength of any but a full-grown man, a menace to friend as much as to foe, if by any chance he had laid his hand on some powder.

The child's ardour was significant of the spirit of the older defenders. They had in mind the Spanish Fury and its horrors, when two thousand five hundred of the people of Antwerp were slain with the sword, and double that number burned and drowned. It looked as if the treacherous duke was bringing another sorrow on the citizens like that of seven short years before. The thought of all the savage slaughter during that last attack from their Spanish tyrants awoke the spirit of resistance in citizens who had endured so much, and one and all, no matter what their religion—Reformer or Romanist—joined hands and swore to die rather than suffer their French sovereign to sack the city and overwhelm it with fire and rapine.

While the prince halted on the steps to direct the defence, a number of us hurried to the Bourse, whence came those cries which I had heard from the French soldiers at the gate:

"Ville gaignée! ville gaignée! Vive la messe! Tue, tue, tue!"

"It reminds me," said a gray-haired burgher who ran at my horse's side, "of that fearful shout that rang over Antwerp years ago—'Santiago, Santiago! España, España! á sangre, á carne, á fuego, á sacco!' If God be not on our side to-day there will be fire and sack, as then!"

"God forbid!" I cried, breathless with excitement, and forcing my horse forward along the winding streets, past the burghers, who made what haste they could. But when I came to the great square in front of the Bourse I found that Antwerp had poured its thousands into the place, and that the burgomaster was leading them on against a thousand horsemen who had burst into the square. The Frenchmen had not counted on Flemish valour. They imagined that their war cries and flashing swords would carry dismay into the hearts of the men of Antwerp, so that sack and rapine would be an easy task. They did not know the spirit of our people. Instead of finding citizens who were only expert in trade, mere countermen and drivers of the quill, they found stern soldiers, who had been learning for years the way to fight, and they fell before the men they had despised by hundreds. While I sat in my saddle, unable to move forward by reason of the dense throng of artisans and traders in front of me, and more and more hemmed in by others, who came by scores, I saw another body of Frenchmen dash down a street to the right, as if to take the citizens in the flank. There must have been some fifteen hundred of them, and their cries rang over the people's heads:

"Ville gaignée! Vive la messe!"

These cries came across a comparatively silent throng, for the spirit of the Antwerpians was such that they entered on the contest in dumb determination to drive back these Frenchmen or die. Now and again one could hear a cry of pain, or a shout of triumph, as some Frenchman of note fell before a Dutch onslaught, or a scream of fear from a woman looking out of a window on the fray, when

she saw the citizens give way before the hoofs of the maddened chargers.

"Bertrand," came a cry from behind.

I looked round and saw Schetz on horseback, a score of yards behind me. There were hundreds of the burgher guard about him, grim and resolute, yet feeling themselves helpless and useless there, where they could not come at the enemy.

"What is it?" I cried.

"Let us lead these brave fellows down some by-street, and take yonder Frenchmen in the rear."

A shout of approval followed, and men now swung round to where Schetz was sitting his horse, and with his sword unsheathed.

"Make room for Master Blomberg, men, and we will lead the way," he shouted, and a lane was cleared for me to ride to his side.

"Now on for the rescue of Antwerp!" He said this dauntlessly, scarcely waiting for me to come up level with him.

The burghers, well trained and well equipped, followed resolutely, and with the steadiness of veterans. Many of them had fought in a dozen pitched battles when the Prince of Orange was measuring the Flemish strength against Spain. They knew what it was to be beaten, but they had won many a hard-fought fight in their time. Others were young men, well drilled, and determined to show the older men that they were worthy of their place in the ranks. Without so much as a battle cry, but with lips close shut and minds bent on victory or death, they followed us swiftly down narrow lanes and broader streets.

Suddenly we burst into a thoroughfare where a number of Frenchmen, seeing us approach, had halted to oppose us. They had underrated their foes, and thought, as all their fellows had done, that the citizens would fly as soon as they saw the flash of French steel and heard the war cry. They were mistaken. The first rush seemed to overwhelm them, and before long we were tramping over the bodies of soldiers who had tumbled from their saddles, hurled from their seats by the thrust of pikes, or killed by

the shots which tore into their midst. Many a horse was riderless after that sudden burst, and some of the burghers, leaping into the empty saddles, rode close behind Schetz and myself while we galloped forward, leaving the footmen to follow with what speed they could.

Presently a strange sight met our gaze. The street that led into the great square was packed with Frenchmen whose horses were ungovernable by reason of their fright. Women and boys were on the roofs, hurling down, alike on horse and rider, the tiles which they tore from their places, doing as much damage thereby as the shot and steel of the husbands and sons who were fighting elsewhere hand to hand. Others again were throwing furniture from their windows, and some were pouring buckets of boiling water, and even flaming oil, on the enemy below. Many a lad, too young to fight in the streets, had found a musket, and while he fired, his sister stood by holding a bandoleer, from which she handed the charge of powder.

This was our opportunity, and when the burgher guard had come up we made such an onslaught that the Frenchmen fell back, paralyzed with fear, and seeking for escape. As they retreated the women desisted, lest they should do us hurt, but they cheered us on, and shouted out many a warning which served us well. On and on we went, the resistance slackening with every yard of our progress. At first we feared that it meant the defeat of the citizens who held the square, but, standing in the stirrups, I saw the French horsemen turning down some side streets to escape. I told Schetz, and, wheeling our horses round, and followed by those citizens who were mounted, we rode down the street in single file, so as to pass through the lane made by the burgher guard. There were nearly a hundred of us who thus rode back, and directed by one who knew the neighbourhood, we galloped along some tortuous lanes, until we met a number of panic-stricken Frenchmen, no longer shouting their war cry, but looking startled and scared, searching everywhere for some way of escape.

Some of them were so utterly cowed that they lost all their fight, and even forced their way into houses in

the hope of finding a hiding place until we had passed on. But from some they came out again, screaming with fear, driven thence by the women who held their homes with whatsoever weapons they had found. One man had evidently rushed upstairs, but presently we saw three women thrusting him through an open window bodily, although he begged for mercy, and when they let him go he fell on the stones of the street below with a crash and broke his neck. There was no time for pity that day, and none for mercy. Life, honour, liberty, possessions, all were at stake. In all the turmoil of the fight, men and women remembered the savage slaughter of seven years before. They thought of the streets which had run with blood, of wives and daughters who had been dishonoured, of husbands and sons mutilated and trodden to death in the murderous fight; they thought of the wanton butchery of babes in their mothers' arms, of the heaps of slain, and of the fires which wrapped their dear ones round and round, so that they died by hundreds. One could not wonder that the women cheered the citizens as they fought in the streets below, and did many a valiant deed themselves to save Antwerp and all that was precious to them.

We had cleared the street into which we had last come, and were riding slowly down a narrow lane, to get a little breathing time, when there was a sudden stamp of feet, with cries of fear, screams, and yells—an uproar I do not know how to describe. We were some fifty yards away from a broad street toward which we had been riding, thinking to cut off such as might be there, and add to the panic and distress of the raiders. A horse galloped past the opening riderless. Then came another with his rider dragging on the stones, his foot caught in the stirrups. Next followed hundreds of horsemen at a gallop, with here and there a falling horse, whose body served as an obstacle to those who came on behind, bringing chargers and riders to grief. Saddles were empty as the snorting steeds dashed on. Men rode by, wounded and dying; more than one retained his seat in the saddle, but his fight was ended, for he was dead. Many of the riders had lost their hel-

mets and their weapons; scores bore marks on head and face which betrayed the fury of the fray, and told of the valour of the burghers. Where, years before, the Spaniards had won the French had failed. But in the bygone time the city had received no warning. What might have chanced if I had not ridden from Bruges I shudder to think of. It at least gave the citizens a short hour of preparation, and here we saw the consequences.

Some of the horsemen, hoping to avoid the missiles which the women were yet hurling on the fugitives from the roofs, turned down the lane where we were halting, but when they saw us they pulled up their horses until they fell back on their haunches, and wheeling round, rode away to take their chance in the broader street. One man stopped so suddenly that his horse reared and fell backward on the rider. The man lay dead upon the stones when the poor charger rose to his feet again, bruised and cut with his heavy fall.

At last the rush had ended. There came no other horsemen, and we rode out of the lane to watch, and if needs be, pursue. Looking down that long street, we saw what appalled us. The flying Frenchmen were blocked in the street. Some of the women having drawn the chains across the way, had returned to their houses. It was in the business part of the city, where chandlers and oil merchants traded, and coopers had their shops and stores. With ready wit the wives and sisters had determined on their mode of warfare. When that block came, and the fugitives knew not which way to turn—unable to go forward, and finding it certain death to ride back by the way they had already come—the women appeared at the windows and on the house tops. Some of them had torches in their hands, and when their companions handed out the barrel hoops, which had been steeped in oil and spirits and tar, or anything that was inflammable, the torch-bearers thrust the flames against them, and the rings of fire were suffered to drop on the screaming soldiers below.

One could not watch without horror, and it was a relief to see the dense mass thin out when the chains had

been removed. The street at that point was full of the dead. They had died there of their wounds, or because of the furious struggle of maddened horses that fought with their hoofs and threw their riders.

I did not follow the fugitives to the Kipdorp gate, but turned toward the Bourse to see how our countrymen had fared. We had thought to see many of the citizens among the slain that lay along the streets, but to our joy we did not find more than an odd one here and there. Everywhere we saw soldiers of France, bearing the badge of Anjou, and at many a point the gay costume of one of noble blood. Two hundred and fifty of such had fallen in the fight that day, and full two thousand of the rank and file. When we reached the Bourse we caught sight of the Prince of Orange and a number of his gentlemen riding down a street which led to the Kipdorp gate. He was wounded, but not severely, judging from his upright seat in the saddle. The citizens were marching after him swiftly, as if to end the fight by a final, resolute charge.

Knowing the way the prince must travel, those of us who were mounted rode to intercept him, and so fall in with the horsemen at the front. We were at the cross street before he arrived, and then I saw that his wound was a serious one which a woman had bound up with her silken scarf.

"Ha! Master Blomberg," said he, when he caught sight of me. "Come hither and tell me what you know of the doings elsewhere."

His eyes flashed when I told him of what the burgher guard had done under Schetz's leadership, and of the way in which the women had fought.

"'Tis like them!" he cried. "Brave-souled creatures! They deserve their liberties, and by God's help they shall not lose them."

When we rode on to the Kipdorp gate we found that the fight at that point had been a tremendous one, for the Frenchmen lay in heaps, blocking up the narrow exit. I had lost sight of Schetz for a long time, but did not expect to find him here. He was seated on his horse, in the midst of the men of the burgher guard whom I had left

with him. He was sorely wounded, and strangely enough, the injury had not come from the enemy, but from a woman who, seeing a horseman ride by, regardless of the fact that he was followed by ranks of burghers, had in her excitement thought him a Frenchman. She had fired her musket, which she rested on the window sill, and the shot had gone through his shoulder. She screamed with dismay when she saw her error, and running down the stairs and into the street, regardless of the shots that were whistling past her, she bound up his wound, while her face was wet with tears by reason of her remorse.

The Kipdorp gate was the scene of a sanguinary fight. We found a warden who was not dead, but left for such, and he told the prince what had happened. The Duke of Anjou had ridden out at the head of a company of French lords and gentlemen of his court, and had halted on the drawbridge, while behind him were some three hundred troopers. The wardens, as had been their wont, came forth from the guardhouse to salute their sovereign, and saw him talking with the Duke of Montpensier and others, who had met him there. These nobles were remonstrating with his Grace, but why, of course, the wardens could not tell, since they were out of earshot. In front of them were the troopers, who, as was their wont, spoke in disparaging terms of everything Flemish, and dropped insults which our men dared not resent since they were but a score against fifteen times that number. The taunts were more exasperating than usual on this particular day, and Captain Kaiser, who had command of the watch, called on Count Rochepot to bid the troopers stay their insults. The count laughed in the captain's face, and told him that Netherlanders had naught before them but to learn forbearance.

Suddenly the duke's voice was heard, and the burgher watch turned to hear him. He was waving his sword at the moment, and his words rang through the narrow archway:

"There is your city, my men! Go and take possession of it!"

Instantly a shot was fired, and the troopers drove their

swords into the bodies of the wardens, every one of whom, save this man who told the story, fell dead on the stones. Then came the rush of horsemen, and Antwerp was given over to the Fury.

It was that first rush which I had witnessed when I was galloping toward the Kipdorp gate.

CHAPTER XXXIX

KING STORK RENOUNCED

THE perfidy of the Duke of Anjou had broken the last thread which bound the people to him. They had hated him from the first, since he had been thrust upon them while their hearts were set on their natural leader, who had unwisely pursued a policy of self-effacement. Had Anjou studied the Netherlander's wants and governed like a wise ruler, he might have won his way with them and they would have accepted him; but he failed them in everything, and proved himself unworthy of their confidence and esteem.

When the French Fury had passed, and in pursuance of the prince's wish I rode to various cities with messages to burgomasters and others, I saw abundant evidence of the temper of the Netherlanders. There was much talk everywhere, and many serious faces were to be seen in the streets. Wherever one turned the chief topic of conversation was the action of the duke, who was spoken of with a temper which differed little from that in which the Spanish king had always been referred to in the worst days of the tyranny. The gentlest minded expressed themselves passionately concerning the infamous and detestable treachery the Son of France had displayed, and in many a village where I stayed a while, and in many a market place of towns and cities, the effigy of Anjou was burned amid execrations.

They considered his conduct a compound of fraud, cowardice, and revenge, and their madness seemed to grow beyond all bounds when they heard that the duke, the guilty one, the traitor and murderer and despoiler, had

assumed the attitude of an injured man. He had the audacity—I can call it nothing less—to say that the Netherlanders of every grade had displayed gross ingratitude, murdering his soldiers, breaking their solemn oaths of allegiance, and depriving him of power which he had accepted at their earnest invitation. I can not think of all the absurd things he said—the effrontery, the lies he told as to the whole thing being an accident, a misunderstanding, and so on. It took one's breath away to read his letters, wherein he expressed himself deceived, basely treated, dealt with treacherously, robbed, and I know not what, while he himself had gone on enduring with the most forbearing spirit.

These letters were the cause of my rides to and fro, for the prince had called the Estates-General together to read them out aloud, while the councillors, with angry looks upon their faces, sat back and listened. One letter was especially shameful, for in it were these passages:

"You know well, my cousin"—the duke was writing to the prince, and this letter had come into Antwerp the night after the Fury—"the just and frequent causes of offence which this people has given me. The insults which I this morning experienced cut me so deeply to the heart that they are the only reasons of the misfortune which has happened to-day. Nevertheless, to those who desire my friendship, I shall show equal friendship and affection. Herein I shall follow the counsel you have uniformly given me, since I know it comes from one who has always loved me. Therefore I beg that you will kindly bring it to pass that I may obtain some decision, and that no injury may be inflicted upon my people. Otherwise the land shall pay for it dearly."

So the letter ran.

I forgot myself entirely, standing behind the prince as one of his attendants, and forgot, too, that it was unseemly that I should say a word. But that sentence roused me: "The insults which I this morning experienced cut me so to the heart that they are the only reasons of the misfortune." I should have called out while the prince was reading, but by an effort I controlled

myself. As he folded the letter, however, and suffered it to fall on the table before him, my self-control vanished completely, and I broke the stern silence:

"'Tis a base lie, and I will tell the duke so to his face."

The prince turned round and looked at me reprovingly, while I stood shame-faced, now that I realized my presumption. It was the second time I had spoken on impulse when silence would have been wise.

"Master Blomberg, I pray you be silent in a council chamber where you have no right to speak," said he sternly.

"Nay, your Highness," exclaimed Van der Werf, rising to his feet, "do not blame Master Blomberg. This is no question for the Estates-General, but for the people, and it is as much for the young man as any one of us. But let that pass. This letter is a hideous lie from beginning to end, an abominable insult to us all, and from this moment—pardon me, prince, if my words should grieve you, but I must say what my heart and my judgment and my duty to the country dictate—I renounce the duke, and call back now and for all my life all my promises of allegiance to Anjou. He is a liar and a traitor, a perjured sovereign who shall never more be recognised by me!"

He was interrupted by a shout from all the assembled councillors, who rose to their feet to signify that they also were of one mind with the burgomaster of Leyden. But the prince, with consummate tact, persuaded them to suspend action a little while, which was a forbearance only exercised for the sake of the love they bore him. For they had grave facts to go upon. It was common knowledge that I had overheard the whole of the arrangements for the Fury in the duke's bedchamber; that I knew of his being in league with the Duke of Parma; that I had actually placed in the hands of the Prince of Orange the letter from Catherine de Medici, which I had picked up in the antechamber, wherein Catherine advised her son to re-establish the Romish religion in the Netherlands at all costs. Much as we loved the prince, we could not blind ourselves to his infatuation.

But that strange infatuation comes to the best of us. A beautiful girl will marry a man who has been proved, over and over again, a scoundrel of the basest sort. A wife will go on loving her husband though his unfaithfulness is apparent at every turn, and though he should make her life intolerable by his cruelties and tyranny. But they say that love is blind, and I have seen enough in my time to know that earthly wisdom is not immaculate. This infatuation of the prince for the Son of France was the one blemish in an otherwise wonderfully capable intellect. Men knew it, and shook their heads because of it, and went to and fro seriously, with a dread in their hearts as to future disasters.

But when I went on my errands I found that the spirit of resistance was abroad, and it was apparent everywhere that the emphatic resolution existed, even though it was only whispered by the timorous:

"Anjou shall not reign on any terms."

"We have had enough of King Stork!" shouted one man in the kitchen of a country inn, where I sat as one of the crowd that had turned in for the night.

"Enough?" cried another; "nay, too much! Landlord, get your Bible."

"Why?" asked the keeper of the hostelry in some surprise.

"Ask no questions, my friend, but you shall see what I mean to do."

The book was brought, and the burly fellow who had asked for it laid his hand on an open page and solemnly renounced Anjou and all his brood. He swore the oath concerning him that the Beggars of the Sea were wont to take concerning the King of Spain.

He went back to the settle where he had been sitting and flung himself into it. There was a hush while he did so, and the crunch of his boots on the sanded floor was heard distinctly. Presently another came across from a table at the farther corner and took a similar oath. Before he got back to his place a third was on his feet. A sudden impulse took the whole of the men present—no mean thing for the Netherlanders, who do little by im-

pulse, suffering deliberation to have sway as a general rule. They were all on their feet, a score at the least, and waited their turn. No man would ever believe that when a Netherlander takes a solemn oath he would turn back from it. The Spaniards ought to have thought of that; the Duke of Anjou likewise; for then they would have estimated the full force of the stern purpose with which the people entered upon the task of winning civil and religious liberty. As it was, our countrymen wearied out the courage of Spain by their slow, stern methods of warfare, confining their movements to spots where the practised Spanish soldiers were placed at continual disadvantage, and so prolonged the struggle that they effectually exhausted the resources of a king who owned the Indies, East and West.

Looking back on those days of my young manhood, I am impressed with the character of my countrymen. They had begun a struggle which called for the draining of their best life in the great and sacred cause. One and all —man and woman alike—prepared to sacrifice everything; to lavish their whole strength on the common object. They had thought, when Anjou swore so solemnly to protect our privileges, that the struggle had practically ended, but when they found themselves mistaken, and realized that they were in as great peril as when Spain was dominant, they nobly rose to take the old task in hand again, with unabated courage—the more tenacious in their purpose, perhaps, because they had found themselves victimized by treachery.

CHAPTER XL

THE FAMILIARS IN THE LANE

I HAD done the work assigned to me, and then was free to look after my own concerns—namely, to find Caroline and bring her into the midst of safe surroundings. Indeed, my mission ended at Bruges, and that same night I sought for Pierre Hesselaer, whom I had left in the charge of Nicholas Taffin.

The round-faced little landlord came to the house-door, standing on the threshold of the private house with all the old liveliness that had characterized him when he kept The Frieslander. He stood with the door flung back against the wall, and the inquiry came patly:

"What is your will, good sir?"

But then he peered into my face, and seeing who his visitor was, drew me in with a welcome, and led the way to a room at the back.

"You are just in time for supper, Master Blomberg. Mary, bring in the stew, for here is a gentleman who will not be loath to join me."

There was no delay, for in came the same bare-armed servant maid whom I had seen at The Frieslander. She stared at me with open mouth, and with such surprise that Taffin had to shout to her to set the stew pot on the table, else the floor would have what was meant for hungry men.

Giving her a friendly nod, and watching the safe deposit of the supper on the white deal board, I asked for Master Hesselaer.

"He is in bed, and is likely to stay there for a day or two. Run, Mary, and see if he still sleeps."

The maiden bounced up the stairs and down again, standing in the doorway to say that the sleeper showed no signs of waking for a week to come.

"I put him a double dose of his sleeping draught, Master Taffin, because last night he was wakeful in spite of what the leech had prescribed. So now he sleeps soundly, and snores in a fashion that would delight the man of physic." Giving us both a nod and a smile, she went to the kitchen to prepare for the next day's scrubbing.

"Is he ill?" I asked anxiously.

"Yes, Master Blomberg," said the landlord; "or let me put it thus—he is anxious about his daughter, and night and day he has talked about your coming, so that she may be brought hither. For days and nights together he has tramped up and down the room, and the stairs, and all the chambers on this level, and the passage, opening the door at times to look up and down the street to see if you were coming, then to re-enter, horror-stricken, because he feared that the Familiars were on his track. That last capture has shaken his nerve, so that I had no alternative but to call in Master Schwerin, the leech, and bid him do something to make him lie by in silence."

We had barely begun our meal, which looked so appetizing that I grew suddenly hungry, when there came a knock on the street door. With the knock came also the sound of a familiar song and no less familiar voice. It set my heart beating to hear that old refrain: "Long live the Beggars."

"'Tis Peter Bakkerzeel!" I cried, springing to my feet, forgetful of hunger, for here was some one who could tell me how Caroline fared. I was at the street door almost as soon as Mary, who had darted out of her kitchen to answer the call for admission.

"Thou wert quick, Mary," said Peter in his cheery voice. He was going to say more, but he started somewhat. The light shining along the passage showed him that a man stood behind the maiden, and alert as he always was against surprise, he stepped back, not to be taken unawares. The next moment, however, he was

across the threshold, clasping my hand in his and covering it with kisses.

"You are safe, master! Safe, thank God! I had a fear that you were done to death like my mother."

His voice broke into the old tenderness at the thought of the dear one who had gone to heaven long ago, but was with him in spirit, day and night, so he believed.

"How is Mistress Hesselaer?" I asked, eager for news, and not waiting till he had gone down the passage to the room, the doorway of which was blocked by Nicholas Taffin.

"She was well, master, when I left her, but anxious about you. Yes, and shut in with Katrine, like a rat in a trap. The Familiars are prowling round the countryside, full half a dozen of them, for I have seen them with mine own eyes. They must be looking for her, or for her father, I know not which; but most probably for my mistress, whom they yet believe to be in the neighbourhood. But let us away at once to secure her escape," he added, with a sudden access of excitement. "It was for this that I came hither. I have an awful fear that they may discover the entrance to John Roston's cavern, and if they do she is doomed. I have come across the country to find Nicholas Taffin, and traced him here, in the hope that I might induce him to come with me and bring one or two others with him, so as to effect her escape. Thank God, I find you here. Come, for time presses," he cried, laying his hand on mine, and drawing me toward the street door.

"I will come with you as soon as I have had somewhat to eat," I answered. "We shall get on faster with full stomachs, Peter. Otherwise it will be more haste and less speed. Friend Taffin, go and get us fresh horses while we eat. There, sit in that chair, Peter, and eat," said I, placing my hand on Bakkerzeel's shoulder after having drawn him into the room where my supper was steaming. I gently thrust him into my own seat while I took another.

"Now eat, Peter," said I, again, when he showed an inclination to rise to his feet. I hindered him by putting

out a hand and holding him down, for I saw that he was weak from want of food, and weary with his journey. "Eat, Peter. You will want all your strength," I added coaxingly, "and if you have none, we shall lose your mistress. 'Tis for her sake."

That was sufficient, for he sat at the table docilely, and began to eat a hearty meal, as if he felt that every mouthful was the means of making Caroline's escape the more assured. But he was on his feet and at the street door, looking up and down, and listening for the clatter of the horses' feet long before Nicholas Taffin arrived. Even that did not content him, for he wandered to the street corner to look about in the hope of meeting the landlord. I was standing at the street door when I heard the sounds of a horse's approach, and looking up saw Peter suddenly appear, mounted and riding ahead, as if impatient of Taffin's slow movements. He had met him, and taking one of the horses from his care, sprang into the saddle and came on, pulling up at the door with such suddenness that the animal's iron shoes struck sparks from the stones.

It was agreed not to tell Pierre Hesselaer that I had been at the house, and away we rode. My passport was sufficient to open the gates of Bruges, and before long we were bounding along the road and leaving the city behind us. I muttered a prayer many a time that I might soon pass that way again with Caroline in my company, and each time, when that prayer was said, I shook the reins, as if to urge on my willing horse to a fresh endeavour. But Peter led the way, going out of the direct course, and bearing somewhat to the west toward the sea.

"'Tis out of the direct road, Peter," I remonstrated.

"'Tis the quickest way, nevertheless," he answered shrewdly. "Parma's army has not moved, and King Stork's forces are likewise yonder, so that we must needs go round. Come, I will show you how we can baulk them."

With these words he urged his horse forward, and we rode on for miles almost without speaking. To our left we could see the watch fires of the Spanish army, hidden now and again by intercepting trees or long, low farmhouses. There was no sign of life anywhere—no

other token that a great army lay within reach, concentrated and ready either to retreat or make a quick advance on the devoted cities of the Low Country. But Spain's hold had relaxed. It was as if the hand grip had loosened with the application of the strong fingers of the Prince of Orange, and that the prize was slipping away. I remember thinking of this as we rode along, and praying fervently that we might drop out of Spain's hands forever.

Once Peter pulled up and caught my horse's bridle.

"Hist! Do you hear the jingling of armour and harness?" said he in a whisper.

I listened; and heard the sounds of which my companion spoke. They came from the front, and the tramp of a large body of cavalry was heard distinctly. They might have been half a mile away, but in the brief halt we heard the jingling of troopers' armour, and the sharp chinking of bits as the chargers tossed their heads restlessly, growing more and more distinct. Possibly it was fancy, but we thought we heard the murmur of men's voices. They were coming toward us at a steady trot, and would soon be on us. They could not be friends, for the prince had no troops in this quarter of the land save in the large cities and more important towns, where they acted as garrisons to keep the walls and gates against Parma or the Duke of Anjou, whom the people had spontaneously renounced.

"This way, Master Blomberg," said Peter, turning to the right, and leading my own horse by the bridle through an open space in a line of bush which edged the road. "We will ride across this moere, and shall neither be seen nor heard."

Following his lead, for what with his nomadic life he seemed to know the country's byways, we rode on silently. The horses' feet fell softly on the soil, and no sound of their progress could be heard at all but the creaking of the saddles as we rose and fell in our seats, the occasional champing of the bit, and now and again a splash of the hoofs in a pool of water in the low-lying ground through which we rode. Once or twice we halted,

and heard the troopers in the distance, the sounds of their going growing less and less distinct, and then the country settled down to its wonted stillness.

We came at last to within a quarter of a mile of Roston's cavern, when three or four dark figures blocked the narrow lane down which we were riding. We suddenly felt our horses' bridles seized, the animals starting and rearing at the unexpected stoppage.

"Halt, my sons," said one, and we guessed, from the muffled tones, that the challenge came from a cowled Familiar. Looking to see who it was that interrupted our progress, we saw four black forms—blacker, it seemed to me, than the night itself, which was less dense than it had been by reason of the faint token on the horizon of a rising moon.

"Familiars!" Peter exclaimed, frightened and unnerved by the unexpected appearance of these ill-omened creatures.

"Courage," said I to reassure him. Turning to these men before us, I asked them why they hindered us while about our business.

"Ask no questions," came the inevitable response, for the Familiars inquired what they chose, and of whom they chose, but they never answered the queries of any outside their own order. "Whither are you going?"

"On business," I responded resolutely, for I was not going to be turned from my purpose now.

"What business?"

"*My* business," I cried out defiantly. "Stand aside."

The Familiars did not move, nor did they take their hands from our bridles.

"You do not seem to know who questions you," said the first of the dark-robed ones.

"Footpads," cried Peter, who had regained his equanimity, and I thought I heard him fumbling in his bosom. "Stand aside and let us pass, or I will send a shot through your body."

There came the squeaking of a pistol cock, and I knew that my companion meant to fight. Poor fellow! God knows he had a great debt to pay, a mother to avenge, a

hundred cruelties to think about, a hunted life behind him, and I could not wonder if he sought to repay some of it, especially when he judged of things with an ill-balanced mind which never weighed consequences.

"Do not fire if you can help it, Peter," said I, in a low voice.

"But I should like to do so, master," came the answer, in a tone which assured me that the old frenzy was returning which would take him over the border line of reason. I dreaded this, for I wanted no murder done if it could be avoided.

"Stand back!" I cried to these men.

"Nay, my son. Think for a moment. We are of the Inquisition, and your business must needs be ours."

A thought came to my mind—a method whereby we might save ourselves from killing anyone. The horse on which I sat responded to the movement of my knees, and swerved a little to the right, so that I came into touch with Peter. Putting out my right arm, I drew his ear down to my lips.

"Do not shoot, Peter," I whispered. "Do as I shall do if they will not let us pass. Make a dash with your boot into the face of the man who holds your horse, then ride past him."

"Stop that whispering," exclaimed the Inquisitor sternly, and that instant I took my hand away from Peter, and sat upright in my saddle.

"This is the last time!" was my response. "Stand back, and let us pass on to our business, and do you go about yours."

"This is our business," said the other, and from the movement of the horse's head I knew that he was taking a firmer hold on the bridle.

"Then take the consequences."

So saying, I drew my right foot out of the stirrup, got it well back, with my knee in the air, and then, with a startling suddenness which none suspected, thrust my heavy boot forward. It dashed full into the cowl. The man screamed with pain, flung up his hands helplessly, fell backward on the road with a dull thud, and, I sup-

pose, lay still, for I could not see him move. Then came another cry and a second fall, and our two horses, rearing and plunging with the sudden application of the spur, dashed forward, trampling on the prostrate ones, and tearing down the lane into the open land not far away.

CHAPTER XLI

IN THE MARSH

We dismounted at an outhouse which Peter told me of, and there lodged our horses, and gave them a plentiful supply of food. That being done, we crossed the bit of bog land which lay between us and John Roston's cave. Crawling in at the entrance, we found the inner chamber in darkness, but that we thought little of. We passed over the open space, expecting to find Caroline and her companions in the next chamber, but that too was empty, and the fire in the corner was burned so low that no light came from it. Peter roused the embers, so that the flames shot up a little and cast a flickering gleam around, sufficient for us to see that there were no tenants save ourselves. The door beyond was wide open, and the apartment into which it led was in darkness.

"Get a candle, Peter," said I, feeling sick with dread lest I had come too late. My companion, now alert and quick-witted, was already halfway across the floor when I spoke, and knowing where to find what I had asked for, came back in a few moments with a lantern.

"They may have gone to the gallery, master, for they knew that the Familiars were abroad before I left. Indeed, I heard John Roston say that it was the safest place, and he carried some food thither, as if he meant to occupy it. Follow me."

This set my mind at rest, somewhat, but I own that my heart was sick when we searched the two inner chambers and found no sign of those whom we were seeking. Then we turned to find the gallery. The way to it had its beginning in the innermost apartment. On one side was

a rocky wall which sloped away, but the rock was so steep that none could have mounted without placing a ladder against it. I looked with dismay, for the ladder was gone. Peter, however, seemed quite undisturbed. Looking about with the aid of the lantern, he came to a spot where he halted.

"Take this lantern, master," said he to me, for I had followed him closely, knowing by his demeanour that he had a scheme in his mind.

When I held it overhead, so as to throw as much light on the rock as possible, and see without my eyes being dazzled, I noticed Peter lying flat on the sloping rock before me, putting his outstretched hand in a niche as far up as he could reach. Lifting one of his feet, he placed his toe in another opening, and so drew himself up several inches. Then, with his hand up again, he found another place, and rose once more in the same manner.

"Now do you see, master? 'Tis like that till we get up there"—pointing to a spot a dozen feet above him. "Hand me up the lantern, and follow as well as you can."

Doing as he had done, but going slowly, since it was hard work for Peter to climb with a lantern in one hand, I mounted the smoothed surface after him, until we came to the top, where we stood on a broad ledge a yard wide, and stretching to the right along the steep cavern side. Following Peter's lead, I trod carefully, for the rock was slippery; yet with all my care I stumbled and fell, bruising myself woefully. On trying to get up I found that I had tumbled on the ladder which had been drawn up out of sight.

In a certain sense I was encouraged, for it seemed to assure me that those whom we sought were in these upper chambers which Peter knew, but of which I had not been aware. Rubbing my arms I went on, and quitting the gallery, passed through a narrow opening in the rock, coming into a large apartment. For a moment we halted, and peering in, saw signs of a lighted lantern, although it was out of sight, hidden behind a corner of rock which seemed to divide off the chamber as with a partition.

"Who are you?" said some one, whose voice I did not know.

Peter started back for a moment, as if surprised, then hastened forward fearlessly. Sometimes timid as a woman, he was resolute and bold on other occasions, and this was one of his moments when he would face danger dauntlessly. He was passing on when he recoiled.

"Great God! Look!"

I stepped to his side. His courageous bearing had changed, and he stood trembling. I could hear his teeth chattering, while he pointed with his free hand to the hitherto hidden part of the cavern. There were two lanterns there, and what with these and the light which Peter carried, we could look about us and see plainly. Two women were lying on the floor, still and silent; perhaps they were asleep. But sitting side by side were three dark figures—FAMILIARS! Their faces were cowled, but from the movement we knew that they were turned toward us, and that six eyes were scanning us, to know who had dared to intrude.

As for me, I had small reason to complain of my companion's fright, for this sudden appearance of such creatures startled me. I looked at the women on the floor, and then at the Inquisitors, and I remember how my hands grew moist, and the flush on the face came involuntarily, while the sweat drops were on my forehead. For a moment or two I trembled, so terrible was the influence of the Inquisition.

But it was cowardly to fear three men because they represented an order that was a terror in the land. Who were those women? Why were they so still? Why did they not turn and look at us, or set up and see whether we were friends? Then came the thought that they might be dead. I turned and looked at Peter. He was bending forward, his eyes open wide with horror, his lips parted, and his tongue moving along them slowly, as if they were parched by reason of his terror. The lantern had fallen from his hand, and the candle was on its side, smoking and blurring the glass, some of which had been shattered by the fall.

The men had risen to their feet and were speaking, but we had not heeded their questions: "Who are you? What do you want here?"

"'Tis Mistress Caroline," said Peter beneath his breath, as if to himself, and the suggestion dispelled my hesitation, making me call myself a fool and coward, to be afraid of three men, when, perhaps, my beloved one was lying dead. Without stopping to think, I drew a pistol from my belt and stalked across the floor, brushing past the robed Inquisitors. Stooping to take up one of the lanterns, I carried it to the place where the women lay. Kneeling by the side of one of them I saw that it was Katrine. She was bound hand and foot and gagged, but her eyes met mine and were full of hope. Stepping over to the other, whose back was toward me, I knelt beside her also, and then, placing my lantern on the floor, but still holding my pistol, flung an arm about her, and covered her face with kisses.

It was Caroline, bound and gagged, but looking at me with unutterable love and gladness because I was near.

A heavy hand was laid on my shoulder while I kissed her, and I turned to see who touched me. It was a Familiar, who bent down and spoke sternly:

"My son, let the woman alone."

"You accursed fiend!" I cried, springing to my feet, my whole soul ablaze with passion to think that my darling was in their power.

The man recoiled, doubtless fearing that I would strike him. But this was no time to spend my strength in vituperation. The demand was to loosen the bonds.

"Peter, draw your two pistols, and shoot down the first who dares to lay a finger on me. Come nearer, so that you may not miss when you fire."

He came forward instantly, and placed himself between me and the Familiars, the two shining barrels gleaming in the lantern light. There was something in his face and eyes which made the Inquisitors recoil a step or two, and they stood and watched him, trembling lest this madman, as they deemed him, should draw the trigger and have his revenge. For they knew him well,

and knew, too, what reason he had for seeking such revenge.

While he stood thus I drew my dagger and severed the cords which bound Caroline's feet and hands; then drew away the gag and kissed the poor, bruised, swollen lips.

"Release poor Katrine," said she when I drew back to look at her.

I had forgotten the girl in the joy of finding my beloved, but hastened to make amends by crossing to her side and loosening the bonds. She kissed my hands passionately when I had done so; then rose to her feet while I was getting up from my own knees, and gave a hand to Caroline, whose limbs were stiff and helpless by reason of the tightness of the cords. These men had remembered how she had fought for liberty, and they had drawn the cords about her hands and ankles remorselessly, heedless of the pain they caused, and determined that she should not this time escape them.

But why they had not gone away with her I did not know till later, when Caroline told me that John and Isabel Roston, having gone away to buy food, were being waited for.

What was next to be done? Were we to bind these creatures and escape? It would be to leave them to die, and Peter advised it; but I had no wish to have their death on my hands. We stood and deliberated, unable to come to a decision until Katrine suggested that we should leave them here in the dark, and suffer them to find their way out how they could. There was no time to be lost, for we knew not whether those others whom we had met in the lane might not be of the same company, and on the lookout for Roston and his wife. They might, in such a case, be back at any moment, and then it would be seven men against two men and two unarmed women.

"Come at once," said I, taking up one of the lanterns while Peter took the other. We passed out at the open door. The Familiars hurried after us, but I turned on them, and they shrank back when they saw my pistol levelled. I stood thus until the others had gone out to

the gallery, then drew the door together, leaving the men in darkness.

Keeping myself between that door and my companions, I bade Peter lower the ladder. The Familiars had found it lying against the sloping rock and so had discovered Caroline and the maiden in their hiding place. Then for some reason they had pulled it up after them. Peter went down first, and stood at its foot to prevent it from slipping. When we had descended I drew the ladder away, and flinging it down on the floor, took Caroline's hand, and once more told Peter to lead the way.

We did not linger, but pressed on through the various chambers, and at last reached the open air and looked around.

The moon had risen, and was flooding the land with light, her beams only intercepted now and again by an occasional cloud which floated past. Ahead of us was the path which led to the outhouse where we had left our horses. To the left lay the marshy land through which we had plunged on that night of our escape from the castle. It showed up now in mottled patches of land and water, the pools gleaming in the moonshine, and the whole expanse looking treacherous. But while we stood for those few moments to get used to our surroundings we saw that there was no other way but through the marsh. Four Familiars—two of them limping as they came—were approaching along the path we would have chosen, and we had no wish to encounter them.

"Try the marsh," said Katrine.

"We do not know the way," I answered.

"But I do, and will lead."

She crossed the intervening space and Peter followed, while I came after, hand in hand with Caroline. Then the Inquisitors, with a cry, came on at a run.

"On, quickly," I shouted.

In and out, turning now to right and then to left, jumping across pools of water, or wading through, we passed on. Drenched to the skin, we plunged and tumbled, sometimes catching our feet in the roots of osiers, and falling forward in the water out of sight of our companions,

rising again, mud covered and ooze stained. But what of that? The four black-robed ones were on our track not many yards behind, cursing us at intervals, and calling on us to stop. The calls were as spurs are to the bounding horse. We hurried forward the more, making for a bit of high land, beyond which was an open sheet of water, a hundred yards across, and deep enough to cover the head of the tallest man.

I saw this in the moonlight, and called to Katrine that if we got so far our escape would be cut off. Before she had time to answer our pursuers had seen this shining expanse, and shouted with exultation. Those stealthy, death-boding trackers forgot their wonted silence now that they thought they had trapped us. They must have known that in the wild plunge through the waters our pistols had become unfit for service. Once on the high land with us they would overcome us by sheer weight, since they were all big built, not one of us their equal in physical strength save myself. Peter was active but slight, and no match for one of these, and as for Caroline and Katrine, what could they do? The Familiars thought of this, and followed with confidence. But on we went, heedless of the mud that pulled at our boots as we lifted our feet, and indifferent to blind plunges into holes which brought the water up to our armpits.

Twenty yards more and we should get to the rising land. Suddenly we heard a scream of fear behind us, and halted involuntarily to look round. One of our pursuers had got out of the track and was floundering in deep mud and water. He was beating with his hands frantically, in the endeavour to keep himself afloat. Whether the mud was clinging to his feet or not I can not say, but he went down slowly, screaming for help from his companions. One went to his aid, and stretched out a hand. They could only touch each other's finger tips. Another inch or two would enable them to grip hands, and a rescue might be effected. The would-be rescuer bent forward, the hands joined—we could see that much in the bright moonlight. The Familar on the higher ground began to pull, but without warning his feet slipped

from under him, and he disappeared beneath the waters, the other going down with him.

There was a moment of suspense, in which the remaining couple, forgetting everything but the peril of their companions, went toward them to see if they could be of service. The two men rose above the troubled surface engaged in a life and death struggle, each clinging to the other in the hope of getting into safety. But that was their mutual destruction. They beat the waters frantically; then, with a cry of horror, and locked in each other's arms, they sank, and we saw no more of them.

The other two stood on the moon-lit marsh land, paralyzed and horror-stricken. They had not even the heart to curse us as the cause of this disaster, but gazed at the spot where their comrades had sunk out of sight, as if they yet thought to see them rise again.

"Come," said Katrine, leading the way to a point for which she had all the time been making, and before many minutes had gone we stood on the dry soil, our garments dripping after that journey through the treacherous marsh.

"But what were we the better?" I thought, while we stood there, looking back on the Familiars, who were yet gazing into that death pond. Katrine answered the unspoken question.

"I can see the boat."

That roused us, and we turned to follow her while she made her way amid the willows which dotted the island. When we got to the water's edge we saw a boat tethered to a tree, and in a few moments were in it, and drifting out on the waters. There was no current, so that the little craft answered to the oars and sped on toward the spot where we could see the outhouse we were bent on reaching. Presently the boat, running smoothly on the soft mud, came to a standstill, and stepping out, we waded to the dry land. Heedless of appearances, we made for the stable and found the horses. Katrine mounted behind Peter, while Caroline, for the second time after an encounter with the night hawks of the Inquisition, sat

clinging lovingly to me, and blessing me for her deliverance.

It was broad daylight when we rode into Bruges, and before long, so soon as she had changed her mud-stained garments for some dry ones, Caroline was in her father's arms, hearing his story and telling her own.

CHAPTER XLII

WHAT CAME OF THE BAN

ONE morning the bells rang out from the Leyden churches merrily, and I listened in some astonishment.

"Hark!" said Barbara. "The wedding bells!"

"Nay, simpleton," I exclaimed laughingly. "What if 'tis our wedding day, who ever heard the bells ring out before a wedding?"

"The prince must have ordered it so," said she roguishly. "He knows that he had a good servant in Master Bertrand Blomberg, and therefore he would have his wedding heralded in unique fashion—bells before and bells after the event."

She was standing at my bedroom door, where I was putting the last touch to my toilet before going to the Cathedral of St. Peter to be married. She looked very beautiful, and her face was radiant, for it was her wedding day also. Conrad de Bresse had come over to Leyden, so that he might carry back his bride to London.

"But stay," said she presently, while we listened to the sounds which rang across the city wildly. "The bells are ringing before and after because it is a double wedding. These are for me, brother. The others will be for you." And throwing her arms about my neck she kissed me fondly, and then tripped downstairs to look for Aunt Materin.

When we went into the streets the clangour was almost deafening. And what was more, the cannon on the Burg were thundering forth now. We could see the flash of fire, the puff of blue smoke, and then came the boom that shook the windows in the houses close at hand. They had

not sounded out like that since the days of the great siege. But we soon heard what it meant.

It was the twenty-ninth of June when Caroline became my wife. On the day before the Duke of Anjou had left Dunkirk for Paris. He had grown weary of ruling a people who had no faith in a royal perjurer, and finding that there were scowls wherever he went, he sought instead the pleasures of a dissolute life in the French capital. Ostensibly he had gone on business, and would return again; but throughout the Netherlands the news was received with joy. Men felt that his going was a retreat; they had the glad presentiment that he would never more return.

"God keep King Stork in Paris!" shouted Peter Bakkerzeel, who had met us at the cathedral doorway, and told us what he knew. He was almost delirious with joy, and the last that I saw of him as we entered the church he was racing up the tower steps, as if he would help the ringers at their task with the heavy bells.

Caroline and I, some nine months later, when things had settled down to quietness, went to London for a little space, to see Barbara and her husband in their home. I had, moreover, a desire to do some business with the merchants in that thriving city. But the holiday was brought to an end abruptly when a letter came from the Prince of Orange, desiring my presence at Delft, where he was staying. The business, he said, was urgent, and before many hours had passed the ship that was to bear us to him was dropping down the Thames.

What that business was we never knew.

It was Tuesday, the tenth of July, Fifteen Hundred and Eighty-four, when I reached the Prinsenhof, and entered the hall—one of those broiling days when one is glad to walk beneath the lime trees to get away from the glare of the sun. I remember crossing the courtyard quickly to seek the shade of the mansion. After the blaze of light outside the house seemed dark, and when I looked around I heard greetings from one and another who knew me, but could not tell who the speakers were save by the familiar voices, for my eyes were dim with that mist

which comes to one at times, when the heat and glare of a summer's day are great.

Everything was so blurred on my entrance that I bundled against some one, and trod upon his foot, bringing a cry from his lips.

It was some one strange, and what his face was like I could not see just then. It looked like all other faces at the moment—a blurred white patch, which turned away from me quickly.

"I ask your pardon," said I, turning round quickly. The man himself went forward out of sight, and seemed to drag one of his feet a little, but I thought nothing of the peculiar limp just then, attributing it to my heavy boot having come on his with all the weight of a stalwart man who had not seen where he was stepping.

After a time my eyes regained their usual clearness, and I saw all that was transpiring. The prince was at dinner when I arrived, so that I waited in the hall until he should be at liberty to tell me the reason for his summons.

"Who is yonder man?" I asked of the Master of the Horse—Jacob van Maldere—who was standing near; and so asking, I pointed to some one dressed in the garb of a French citizen. I did not see the face, or I should have had no need to put the question; but many a time since that day I have indulged in the vain wish that I had seen it. I might have been the means of preventing infinite sorrow, and of averting a ghastly crime.

"'Tis the messenger who came from Paris with news of the death of the Duke of Anjou," was the reply. "But I do not like the fellow. I would gladly toss him into the canal yonder for a canting hypocrite, walking about as he does with a Bible in his hand continually."

From that Van Maldere turned and began to talk of the many attempts that had been made of late on the life of the prince. Less than three months before, Hans Hanzoon, of Flushing, had sought to earn the reward offered in the ban by concealing a barrel of gunpowder in the house where the prince was to stay. Then Le Goth, a French officer, had been bribed by the Marquis de Riche-

bourg to poison him; but fortunately the man had turned honest, as Van Maldere put it, and had told of the plot. It was the fifth attempt within two years, said the soldier, while he turned away. He was still speaking when the door of the room where the prince had been dining opened, and I could see my master standing a moment in the doorway, talking with the burgomaster of Leewarden. Behind him was the princess—for the prince had married again—and the ladies and gentlemen of the family. Anxious to show that I had come, I stepped forward, reaching the foot of the stairs just as he prepared to ascend them. My back was turned to a dark archway which led into a narrow lane, but this I knew nothing of, for the house was strange to me.

"Ha! Blomberg, you have arrived? I thank you for your promptness. Come to me an hour hence."

He had a foot upon the stairs while he spoke, and his body half turned toward me. When he reached the second step there was a movement at my side. A man brushed by and held up his hand. I started back for a moment, for it seemed as if the fellow meant to strike me; but then came a flash and a loud report, another, and yet a third, the man at every shot throwing down a smoking pistol to pull another from his belt. I saw the prince bring his right hand to his heart and fall heavily. The Master of the Horse ran forward, and going on his knees, took him in his arms.

Looking around, I saw that others were, like myself, thunderstruck. But some one cried out for the murderer, and the cry roused me to action. The archway to my right had been in darkness, now it was flooded with light, and looking through, I saw an open door. And more than that. Some one was racing down the narrow lane, tossing aside everything that would hinder his flight. He ran with a limp, but notwithstanding that went on with amazing speed. Unbuttoning my cloak as I went, I dashed down the lane at a pace which I had never counted on possessing. What cared I for the blazing sun, the broiling heat which even hushed the songs of the birds, and left a silence everywhere which made my own foot-

steps seem loud and startling? On and on I went, but the fugitive had such a lead that I almost despaired of overtaking him.

Behind me, presently, came loud shouts, and the sounds of a score of feet in hot pursuit. Would the murderer reach the city walls, and so escape by plunging into the moat? It seemed to me as if he would, for whenever I thought that I gained upon him he made a fresh spurt. Once, when he got to the corner he paused, drew a pistol —the fourth—from his belt, levelled it at me, and fired. The ball whistled past me. Meanwhile, without hesitation, resolute to take my chance so that I might catch this assassin of our beloved prince, I gained on him considerably. He went on again, but he had made a fatal stay.

Desperate, and savage at heart, I went on madly, and presently got so near to him that I could hear his breathing, sharp and quick, showing that he was distressed. I thanked God for that, because here was proof that he could not maintain his flight much longer.

Not far ahead I saw that the narrow street down which we were racing was partly blocked up. Some workmen had been digging up the road, and were even now tossing out the earth. The fugitive went on, purposing to spring over this obstacle. Had I possessed sufficient breath I should have shouted to the men to stop the fellow, but they worked on, shovel after shovel full of earth being flung out, to make the heap yet higher. On went the fugitive. He seemed to me to be gathering up his strength to reach the top of the heap and spring over. He got to the top just as my feet touched the loose stones at the bottom, but he stumbled and fell headlong. I was up in an instant, and saw him lying in the pit, but he sprang to his feet and sought to scramble out on the farther side.

"Hold him!" I cried to a workman who was looking on astonished.

Without waiting to ask questions the man gripped him by the collar, then fell back with a cry of pain. The assassin had drawn his dagger, and swung it round so that he struck the workman in the side. But another

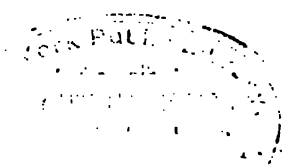
had seen this and made a dash with his heavy shovel, striking the fellow on the wrist, so that the dripping weapon fell to the ground. Another blow struck him backward, and he fell heavily across the body of the wounded man. Before he could move I had him by the collar, while the workman, knowing nothing of what had happened at the Prinsenhof, was holding his hands to keep him from doing further mischief. He had begun, prostrate though he was, to fumble about in his bosom, as if he would draw some weapon forth, and the man seeing this pinned him down.

Then for the first time I saw who the assassin was. IT WAS FRANCIS GUION!

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When we arrived at the Prinsenhof with our prisoner a little later, we found that the Prince of Orange had breathed his last. The ban, alas! had not been published in vain.

THE END






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